

Wayward Strangers

by pieandsouffle

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Fantasy

Language: English

Characters: Astrid, Hiccup, Stoick, Valka

Pairings: Astrid/Hiccup, Stoick/Valka

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2014-09-03 13:07:47

Updated: 2016-03-14 09:38:38

Packaged: 2016-04-26 20:54:21

Rating: T

Chapters: 10

Words: 25,129

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Berk has never had a good history with dragons, especially after the chief's wife and infant son were taken by them twenty years ago. But Berk finds that it must rapidly change its ways when a mysterious woman on the back of a dragon comes to plead for help. Her son, and Berk itself, are about to face the biggest threat the Viking world has ever seen. And it won't go well.

1. Chapter 1

****Heh. This happened by accident. I'd just been thinking about HTTYD2. Oops. I will update this, just not as fast (probably) as my Avengers fic.****

****This is an AU in which Hiccup was taken by Cloudjumper too. There are some spoilers for HTTYD2, but it's not the _huge _spoiler. I think most people would have seen that by now anyway if they're looking up HTTYD fanfiction, but it's not going to be mentioned.****

* * *

><p>Stoick_

The figure stretched out a hand, to pacify, to calm. In different circumstances, Stoick might have immediately listened to what the figure had to say, but the dragon behind the rider obscured all his vision. It just stood behind its master, patiently, _loyally, _as if it was some kind of _pet. _And that- that _thing, _he recognised it, oh he most certainly did.

Red-hot fury burned behind his eyes. It was an anger that might not have taken over him if his family hadn't been taken; Valka, his beautiful, enigmatic young wife and Hiccup, his son, barely two months old. And it had been by that creature. Stoick remembered everything about that moment. The fire, the frightened cry from

Valka, the wail from his son as the four winged dragon snatched them both out of his life to inevitable ends.

Stoick's axe was in his hands before he remembered pulling it out and pointing it directly at the masked figure. He could see the mask properly now, as Gobber and Spitelout moved in closer, torches high above their heads. It was crude, like a child's drawing, with spines crookedly erupting from the head. Splashes of bright paint flecked the pines, swabs of blue and yellow. They flickered in the firelight like coloured fish in clear water at sunset.

The dragon stayed behind, solemn and staring. Its eyes in its wide face looked directly at him, knowing, _recognising. _

It knew what it had done.

It knew what it had taken.

And it wasn't sorry.

Splinters of wood from the axe handle feebly pressed against his calloused palm as his grip grew tighter.

"Wha' do yeh want?" He yelled at the figure. The person retracted their hand sadly and wrapped it around the staff held in the other arm, in such a way it was as if they had hoped for a different greeting. The figure didn't stand like a human, it crouched and swayed like a kind of animal. Gobber pressed forward until he was closer than Stoick was. He raised his arm, the one missing a hand with a torch plugged into the socket.

_Shi-i-i-ng. _Spitelout pulled out a sword and held it pointed, unwavering, at the dragon rider. The firelight flashed menacingly on the blade. His son, Snotlout, the- _replacement _heir pushed forward, eager to get a glimpse of the action. Behind him trailed the other young Vikings; the obnoxious twins, Ruffnut and Tuffnut; a great big mess of cowardice and unneeded intelligence, Fishlegs, and- Where was Astrid? Stoick decided it didn't particularly matter.

The sight of youngsters usually calmed him slightly, making him behave better in public in the knowledge that children were present. But far from pacifying him this time, his rage increased a hundredfold.

Hiccup would have been there age. If it wasn't for that dragon. Hiccup would be a grown man, grown out of his infantile frailty, a tall, strong man worthy of leading the world. Stoick sometimes imagined what Hiccup would be like if he had lived past that day. Built like him, he assumed. With his mother's humour and intelligence. The model of what a male Viking would be. He'd have been the leader of all those his age from when he was young. He'd have been taller than Snotlout, of course, but that wasn't a particularly difficult feat.

That dragon was responsible for the loss of a great man and woman.

Stoick shook himself out of his reverie. "I _said, _'wha' do yeh want?' And why do yeh have that- tha' _demon _with yeh?"

The rider flinched as a Viking, presumably Erik Hofferson, prodded them with a spear. One of the twins, presumably the female one, let out a cackle.

"I need help," the rider said, voice muffled by the mask. "Yer help." The voice was unmistakably female. And quite familiar, but Stoick ignored that. Possibly she was a traitor from a neighbouring tribe that he had met a long time ago.

"What?" Snotlout asked, as literate as he had always been. Stoick, under his surprise and fury at the impertinence of the rider, hoped that Snotlout's verbal skills would improve before he became chief.

"Why should we give yeh help?" Stoick snarled. "If it's help killin' that monster, I'd be more'n happy to oblige."

"Cloudjumper is no monster," the rider said firmly. "E's as intelligent as yeh or I." Vikings murmured and more weapons were directed her way. Her grip on the staff tightened. "An' yeh should help me because it concerns yeh and yer tribe." Erik Hofferson tapped her mask with the end of his spear. "Stop tha'!" she chided.

"How?" Stoick growled, refusing to lower his axe. He couldn't remember hefting it up, but there it was, in perfect position to make a killing blow to the woman standing calmly with his family's killer. "How does it concern us?"

"Two words. Drago Bludvist."

Spitelout dropped his sword. Stoick axe nearly slipped from his grip, but his warrior reflexes made him wrap his thick fingers around the handle all the tighter.

"Why's everyone so horrified?" the male twin asked loudly. Tuffnut? That was the male one, wasn't it?

"Drago Bludvist," Stoick spat, "is one of the greatest monsters to walk Midgard. He is bloodthirsty, insane and a murderer." He focussed his glare upon the dragon beside the woman. It stared stonily back. "A murderer," he repeated. "As much as tha' demon."

"He's nae-"

"A murderer?" Erik prodded her with the spear again.

"I toldja to quit it!"

"Why'd'yeh need our help?" Stoick boomed. The woman pushed away Erik's spear with visible annoyance.

"It's mah son. He's trying to talk sense intae Drago. Yeh know wha' Drago Bludvist is capable of, Stoick the Vast. Mah boy will be slaughtered." Stoick recalled returning home to Valka, covered in burns and tiredly recounting the attack, and then tearfully recalling the deaths of his kin. Perhaps he should aid this woman. She appeared to despise Bludvist. Each time she mentioned his name, Stoick could practically hear the lip curl.

Gobber apparently didn't think it was a wise idea. "Talk some sense

intae yer kid," he suggested, waving his torch around. "T'aint our problem yer boy's not a sharp blade."

The woman hissed defensively. "Mah boy's plenty intelligent, Gobber. 'E's done a be'er job wha' with his leg in five years than you have in twen'y!"

Something in what the woman said started a warning in Stoick's head, but he couldn't for the life of him think of what it was.

"How are we supposed to help yer son? I'm assumin' he's hoppin' round on a devil too!" Gobber seemed to be unable to come up with a retort about his prosthetic leg.

"Why nae just tell his dragon to take him away? Dragons've always been good a' tha'." Stoick sent another glare towards 'Cloudjumper', the monster gazing calmly at them.

"Why'd'yeh hate Cloudjumper so?" The woman asked angrily. She placed a covered hand on the dragon's nose. It made an appreciative purring sound in its throat. Stoick felt sick at its visible contentment.

"Tha' pet o' yers took mah family,_" he shouted. "It killed mah wife Valka and mah son Hiccup. And yeh treat it like it's family. Yer a traitor to humankind!" Out of the corner of his eye he saw the teenagers and younger Vikings perk up interestedly. He never spoke about Valka and Hiccup. It was too painful to discuss, and so many of the younger Vikings weren't aware of what had happened.

"I ne'er thought about it like tha'," the woman muttered to herself quietly. There was a prominent pause in which she seemed to contemplate saying something, but she shook her head. "No. The past is past."

The sun was coming up, and the torches were hardly need to light the scene anymore. The silhouette of the woman had turned from a sinister, shadowy figure into a skinny woman with a scary mask. The dragon remained the same, eyes lingering on Stoick with occasional flicks back to its mistress.

"His dragon is loyal to mah boy," the woman eventually continued. "Tha' dragon wouldn't listen to me. It's as stubborn as mah son is. I cannae force them away." She sighed. "I cannae believe I'm askin' this, but I need the force from yeh and yer tribe to stop Drago and pull mah stupid son out o' the fight."

Stoick's axe dropped slightly. The woman noticed this.

"Please. Yeh said a dragon took yer family. Don't let Drago take mine."

Her voice no longer had that calculating edge to it. It was pleading now.

"I'll have ta think abou' it," Stoick said coldly. He began to walk away. "Pu' er and tha' dragon under guard in the Kill Ring."

The woman allowed herself to be pushed in the direction of the arena. Her dragon initially snarled when a Viking prodded it none-too-gently

with an axe, but a few words from the woman calmed it. As they passed Stoick, the woman kept looking directly ahead. The dragon gave him a suspicious, calculating look from the eyes set deep in its wide head.

"Mah son is barely twen'y," the dragon rider said. She didn't say another word, and soon disappeared down the hill with her dragon.

That half made up Stoick's mind. But the main question lazily spinning in circles in his brain was _did he hate Drago more than dragons?_

That was a question of which he was uncertain of the answer.

* * *

><p>Fishlegs_

All four of the teens (they still weren't sure where Astrid was) had volunteered to escort the dragon rider to the Kill Ring. This had to be, far and away, the most interesting thing that had ever occurred on the isle of Berk in forever.

Fishlegs was torn between terror, interest and something else he wasn't quite sure of the name of. His eyes kept flicking back to the dragon, the Storm Cutter, analysing it, taking in its features.

Four wings. Best at flying. Powerful chest muscles to act upon wings. Small eyes, wide mouth and small teeth. Relies on hearing, but eyes work well as they are defended by large horns. Does not eat large prey, teeth too small and mouth an inconvenient shape.

His obsession with knowing _everything _about a dragon's features should have been of benefit to him, but no one had ever thought of it as a good thing. Thanks to the dragon rider, there was now a new focus of attention and the others were laying off harassing him.

He'd always been the one that was mocked. He often wondered whether it would have been different if there was another one of them.

The woman walked silently, as did the dragon, but when Tuffnut lazily stretched out his spear to poke the lady in the back, the dragon snarled and made a grab for the spear. It would have succeeded too, but the woman spun around and calmed the dragon. Fishlegs took a step back.

Fast. Easily strong enough to carry us all away at once. But it doesn'tâ€|

"Easy, Cloudjumper," she murmured. "Don't hurt the children." She pressed her hand against the dragon's nose.

"Children?" Snotlout said indignantly. "Lady, I'm the future chief and the bravest warrior in the village. I'm not a _child."_

"Neither am I!" Ruffnut announced.

"Same here!" Tuffnut interjected. "We could kill you with a dead leaf." He skewered a leaf with his spear and held it up triumphantly.

"Doubtful, considering that the leaf-" Fishlegs began, but he trailed off as the other sent him ferocious glares. They turned away and focussed on the dragon rider again. He forced his attention to her too.

Her clothes were some of the weirdest things Fishlegs had ever seen. They were like a second skin, a shell that surrounded the fragile flesh underneath. He found himself instantly thinking of dragons and their scales. Her mask was like a dragon's head, rearing up out of the armoured body.

That was what she was. A dragon.

The others weren't focussed on what Fishlegs was, though. Snotlout attempted to spin his hammer around his fingers. He nearly dropped it, and smiled when he caught it and raised it, boasting his incredible talent. "Scared yet?" Fishlegs wasn't.

The woman, however, laughed. "Definitely. Confidence is an admirable trait'."

"Oh, I know."

"Overconfidence is actually the opposite-" Fishlegs attempted to get another word in, but sceptical looks from the three others silenced him. Oh, it would be nice to actually have a bit of respect for once.

"Overconfidence is a flaw, I agree with yeh there," the woman said thoughtfully. "It's somethin' Drago Bludvist has." Her smiling voice steeled when she mentioned the man that everyone was so desperate to learn about. Their steps began to make crunching sounds as the path turned to gravel as they approached the Kill Ring.

"What's the big deal with Dargo Blood-fist? I mean his name's kinda cool, but you said that the chief knew what he was like."

Fishleg's ears perked up.

The dragon lady remained silent for a few moments, and only the crunching of their feet could be heard. She stayed quiet until they reached the great Iron Gate that led into the arena.

"When yeh were all babes still, Drago Bludvist was an unknown name. I weren't there, bu' I know tha' he killed a lo' of chiefs of different tribes. When they were all gathered in a meetin', he set the dragons he was controllin' on them. Yer chief, Stoick the Vast, was the only survivor."

They all remained silent as they began hoisting the gate up. Except Fishlegs.

"If you hate him so much, why do you have a dragon like him?"

The dragon woman stroked Cloudjumper's small nose. "It's nae the dragons' faults they're a' the mercy o' tha' man. Good dragons in the

control of bad people do bad things."

Snotlout seemed to realise suddenly that they had let all their weapons drop. He hoisted up his hammer. "In."

"O' course," the woman shrugged. She stepped into the arena, which was already occupied by someone.

"Astrid!" Snotlout yelled delightedly. Fishlegs and the twins rolled their eyes and looked away. Even from the distance they could see Astrid preparing herself to punch the future chief.

* * *

><p>Astrid_

"For Thor's sake, Snotlout will you _stop_" Astrid began, but she realised that it was not just the group of teens.

There was woman with them, a dragon rider, and her dragon, a Storm Cutter.

Her heart nearly stopped.

* * *

><p>Ruffnut**

Astrid's fist was already closed, ready to knock out a few teeth, but when she saw the dragon rider, her arm dropped. She didn't even seem to realise.

The others pushed the woman and the dragon into the ring and let the gate slam shut, making clouds of dust billow into the air.

"Who's this?" Astrid asked.

"This isâ€|" Ruffnut began, but couldn't bring up a name. Had the dragon lady introduced herself? She knew the _dragon's _name, which wasn't helpful. "A cool dragon lady," she finished.

"Which we have to guard until the chief decides whether to help her or not," Tuffnut interjected.

"'_Who',_" Fishlegs corrected quietly. "'Which' only applies to-"

"Shut up, nerd," Snotlout said.

Astrid's eyebrow raised. It looked like she was putting on her typical 'I don't want to deal with you guys' face. It looked a bit wrong, though. "Why does she need help?"

Ruffnut shrugged. She had been about to tell Astrid she should have been listening better when dragon lady said it before, but then again, Astrid _hadn't _been there. "Her dragon riding spawn is trying to take on some dude who killed some of the chief's friends. Dragon Bloody fist, I think."

Astrid's eyes flicked nervously to dragon lady. Nervously? Nah,

Ruffnut must have mis-seen. That was suspicion.

Right?

Astrid turned to dragon woman. "So your son is trying to talk to Drago Bludvist?"

How did _she _know his name? Then again, it was Astrid. Astrid seemed to know everything about everything without looking as nerdy and loser-ish as Fishlegs.

"Yes. He thinks he can convince Drago tha' dragons aren' bad. Bu' Drago Bludvist cannae _ever _have his mind changed. No matter tha' my son is right."

"Right."

Ruffnut tugged on one of her braids. Five years ago, she would have expected Astrid to react completely differently, most likely screaming with an axe and lots of threats. Then she changed suddenly, and no one was sure why.

Still, it was kinda frightening to see Astrid so calm.

"I have to go," Astrid announced. She shoved past Snotlout, who had attempted to sling an arm around her shoulders. She left a small trail of grass behind her, presumably from her boots. She trained in the woods a lot.

They all turned to watch her leave. She levered her axe under the gate and hoisted it up by about two feet, and then nimbly bent under it. She pulled her axe away and more clouds of dust rose into the air as the gate shuddered to a close on the earth.

"Ugh, she's so perfect," Snotlout said dreamily. "She's so gonna be my wife."

Ruffnut snorted. "She said no _twice, _idiot."

* * *

><p>God I love this franchise. My deepest apologies for the poorly written accents. Updating will most likely be slow. Most likely. My priority right now is a different fic.

2. Chapter 2

I'm supposed to be writing my Avengers fic. But this is just so damn fun to write

Ahem, in this chapter I'm laying off the accents a bit. Just do your best to think in a Scottish accent.

* * *

><p>Gobber_

The Vikings collected in the war room, anxiously waiting for their chief to return with his final word on the subject of the dragon

woman.

As the others argued and fidgeted around the table, Gobber sat back at a wooden table and nonchalantly attached his mug to where his hand had once been. He didn't particularly care what would happen. If Stoick chose to aid the dragon woman, then he had good reason to do so and Gobber would follow him in that decision. If Stoick chose otherwise, then Gobber would back him up too. It really wasn't of any contest.

He felt slightly offended by the woman's comments on his leg though. It was true that he hadn't changed its design in over twenty years, but it did its job, didn't it? He could walk, he could run (albeit with a limp), he could still train new recruits for dragon training.

Not that new recruits were needed anymore. Gobber took a swig from his mug and felt his stone tooth fall into the mug. It was odd, really. Every teen in Berk was trained to fight dragons, but they didn't attack anymore. The bloodthirsty beasts that had once been the scourge of the skies were- _gone. _It was the strangest thing. Gobber stuck his remaining hand in the mug and fished around for the tooth.

Five years ago, around about the time Astrid and Snotlout had competed for the honour of killing the Monstrous Nightmare in front of the village, the attacks just ceased. Just like that. Of course, the occasional dragon swooped overhead and maybe took a sheep, but there were none of those _raids _that used to happen so frequently.

Gobber successfully pinned the tooth between two of his thick fingers and lifted it out of the mug, dripping with mead.

Ah, no matter. Dragons were still a threat to the Viking lifestyle.

He hammered his tooth back into his gum. He looked up to see a young Viking woman eyeing him distastefully. "A little early for a drink, ain't it Gobber?" She pushed a thick red braid over her shoulder.

He shrugged. "I think capturin' a dragon lady warrants a drink, don't it, Freyja?"

"Perhaps." Freyja didn't look convinced. She opened her mouth, presumably to argue with his point, but she was interrupted.

"The chief's comin'!" Snorri Thorsten bellowed, silencing the hall. After a few seconds of silence, the Vikings began talking even louder, excitedly wondering aloud what the chief's decision would be.

"I do nae believe my brother would work wi' that woman," Spitelout announced noisily. "He's the chief of Berk. No stranger's boy can make him fight wi' dragons."

"I think it's a possibility!" Freyja's husband, Rognvaldr stated. "Maybe chief Stoick's got a softer heart than we give 'im credit for!"

This statement started an uproar of laughter. Spitelout pounded the table, spilling someone's mead, and Rognvaldr grinned appreciatively at the Gobber grumpily glared from his lone table.

"If my brother says he'll help the dragon rider, I know _I _for one will _nae _be standing wi' him," Spitelout continued. "Dragons are _enemies. _It's tha' simple."

"The chief'll do what he thinks is right," Gobber said. "'S'not about his heart, 's about his head."

The laughter quieted down a little.

"I said, the chief's coming!" Thorsten yelled. "So _shut up!_"

Right on cue, it was. Just as the last chuckling Viking stopped, Stoick the Vast punched the doors open.

"I've come to my decision."

* * *

><p>Stoick_

As the dragon woman was taken away by the youngest Vikings, Stoick rubbed his eyes and strode away from the village. He needed time, and space, to _think._

He wasn't sure what the woman had hoped to achieve by telling him her son's age, but a heartstring split. Twenty.

Hiccup would have been twenty. He tried to push away that thought, _this wasn't about his family, _but they kept rising to the top of his thoughts like a pieces of wood trying to be drowned by the sea. There was no use to trying to quell the thoughts.

As Stoick walked to the docks, his mind was in turmoil.

He could choose to help this woman, this- _dragon rider, _traitor to their own kind for her child's sake. Had the child chosen to live this lifestyle? Had he run away with his mother willingly? Or had he been forced into an alliance with dragons.

The wood of the docks creaked under his tread. The sun was almost fully up, reflecting on the sea like dragon fire. Like the fire that had burned the empty boats symbolising Valka and Hiccup's bodies.

Stoick sat down heavily on the edge of the dock. He was a tall man, very tall, but his feet were nowhere near the surface of the water.

"What would Valka do?" he asked aloud. As soon as he said it, he knew precisely what Valka would have done. She'd have instantly agreed to cooperate with the dragon woman, for the sake of the rider's son and in the hopes that the alliance would change the minds of those on Berk. That they would realise what Valka seemed to see. That dragons were not monsters.

But that was all before she was taken. Before his wife and son were

gone.

Stoick had known his wife well. But it had been twenty years, another memory of her faded every day.

He stared out to sea. The only memory that never faded was one that did not even have her in it. It was just standing on the dock with the rest of the village silently behind him, Gobber beside him, and the burning ships being taken out to sea.

Dragons had killed his family. It was clear that they were the enemy.

But then there was _Drago Bludvist. _He shifted uncomfortably. He didn't feel the cold, Vikings were never bothered about the weather, but just thinking about Drago made him shudder.

Another foe, another nemesis Stoick had had to face. The fire was the same, anyhow. He could remember the shrieks like his fellow chieftains were dying beside him right then, screaming their last amidst fire and terror.

Stoick stood abruptly to shake out the memories. Valka and Hiccup were dead. The other chieftains were dead. They all lived in the halls of Valhalla. Would his family be proud of his stepping into danger for their sakes? Would his dead friends?

Revenge was out of the question.

It was just about Berk now.

How could he keep his home safe?

* * *

><p>Gobber**

As Stoick stepped through the doors, Gobber drained his mug and got to his feet. His friend's face was angry and decisive. A Viking holding a small child shushed his daughter as she let out an "_oohh someone's angry" _followed by a cackle of laughter.

"I've come to my decision," he said. His voice filled the room. Gobber wouldn't have been surprised if the plates and mugs rattled on the tables from his booming voice.

Spitelout's mouth was slightly open, obviously prepared to either cheer Stoick on his decision or to mock him.

Gobber hobbled over to his friend. Stoick's expression was cold, and he was reminded of the last time Stoick had looks like that. Which was when _it _had happened.

"What'd yeh decide, Stoick?"

* * *

><p>Snotlout**

Snotlout scratched at his little facial hair and leant on the wall of

the Kill Ring. They'd been there for _hours, _and he was hungry. And the dragon lady wasn't doing _anything. _She was just sitting there next to her dragon, totally calmly like she wasn't worried about being supervised by four amazing Vikings.

He wished the woman would do something that would give him an excuse to attack her. Then he could boast to the village about an incredible feat of courage. Maybe Astrid would be impressed for once. Maybe she'd finally agree to marry him.

He tried not to let it bother him, but her constant refusals did irk him. By Viking law, he could propose only _three _times before he was required to never approach the subject again. He'd asked first when they were sixteen, and her disgusted look she quickly hid followed by a polite refusal just made him even more infatuated with her. The second time, two years afterwards, she had refused again, this time with a threat. _I said no nicely once already, Snotlout. Ask again and you won't be capable of feeding yourself, let alone running a village. _

She acted as if he _harassed _her. When was anything he did ever called _harassment? _Or _arrogant? _Maybe the truth hurt some people, but they'd have to deal with _eventually. _And the truth was, Snotlout really was just _incredible. _

Maybe she wanted a greater _man. _Snotlout had grown facial hair purely for that purpose. But honestly, he was _already _a great man. He'd come second in dragon training (behind her, of course), and he was going to become chief.

Snotlout watched the dragon woman silently rest against her dragon, and he delicately picked his nose.

Huh. He could be a man. He _was _a man. He could block out the sun if he wanted, he just didn't have the time. Actually, that was a good idea. Would it impress Astrid?

Movement from the dragon cages alerted him and broke him out of his daydream of Astrid beaming at him as he blotted out the sun.

"Heyheyheyhey!" He yelled. "The dragons are moving!" The dragon woman looked up with interest.

Ruffnut snorted. "So what? The only thing _I'm _worried about with them is that they might not eat you."

Tuffnut gave a bark of laughter.

Snotlout fidgeted. What if they got out? What if they ate someone? Namely, him? The village wouldn't run itself.

"Are you okay, Snotlout?" Fishlegs asked. Of course he was fine, idiot! But Snotlout couldn't seem to talk without stumbling over his words.

"Ye- yeah, I'm fine, just wh-what if the dragons come out?"

He silently cursed himself.

The dragon woman tilted her head slightly at him.

"Out of what?" Ruffnut said. "They're _in _their cages, idiot."

"They could get out."

Ugh, maybe there was a reason Astrid wasn't interested in him.

No wait, that was dumb. He would completely unsurprised if every unmarried female on Berk was interested in him.

Except possibly Ruffnut. But he wasn't particularly worried about her.

"Are you _scared_, Snotlout?"

"NO!" Snotlout said loudly. "And even if _was, _which I'm not, dragons are scary- I mean, obviously, _I _don't think they're scary but to a less brave person, they _would _be scary. And dangerous." The expressions of his friends were so sceptical; he looked wildly around for an excuse. He found one.

"_That _dragon killed the _chief's _family, remember?" He said, pointing to the dragon woman's dragon. The big one with four wings. What was its name? Sunhopper? Cloudskipper? Something like that.

It appeared everyone had forgotten that fact momentarily; the others all cast anxious glances at the beast and took a step back. The dragon narrowed its eyes with a look of satisfaction. If he didn't know better (and he _always _knew better), Snotlout would say that dragon was laughing at them.

The woman spoke for the first time in an hour or so. "For Odin's sake, Cloudjumper did _nae _kill Stoick's family!" she said crossly. "He's nae the murderer Stoick thinks he is!"

"So what is he?" Fishlegs asked. "If he's not a killer, then what is he? The chief knows that dragon. I mean, it's not something you would forget, right? Like the dragon that took your family."

The woman sighed, and there was a pause before she continued. "I presume it was a different Storm Cutter. There's more'n _one _dragon per species, young man. Even if it _were _Cloudjumper tha' took them, I'm sure he didn't hurt them."

Snotlout wished she wasn't wearing the mask. Her last few sentences were shifty, like she had just done some particularly quick thinking, but he wasn't quite sure if she had. If so, Snotlout was sympathetic. Quick thinking wasn't included on the list of his many talents. Like, he was sure that if the situation came to it, he could be an _amazing _quick thinker, but that scenario had yet to come into effect.

"I bet you're a spy for Drago!" Tuffnut announced out of the blue.

"Yeah!" agreed Ruffnut. "Why else would you come here?"

"To warn Berk about the possibility of Drago Bludvist slaughterin' yer entire village?" the woman suggested. "And to save my son."

"Why are you, like, so obsessed with helping your son?" Snotlout asked stupidly. He didn't think it was a stupid question, but by the looks that Fishlegs, Tuffnut and Ruffnut gave him, apparently it was.

"Because it's her _son, _moron," Tuffnut said, clearly forgetting he had literally just stated that he thought she was a spy.

The dragon rider answered his question a little more nicely than Tuffnut had. "I'd do anything for my boy. Just as any o' yer parents would for yeh."

Snotlout scuffed some of the gravelly surface of the Kill Ring with the handle of his axe. It was impossible to say anything that would make the woman angry or aggressive. He carefully went through some ideas that would piss her off supremely, but then his favourite person, like, _ever, _stormed into the Kill Ring, and all thoughts of that disappeared.

"Astrid! You're back!"

Astrid gripped her axe tighter and greeted them with a scowl and no fond salutations. "Your dad wants me to swap guarding her with all of you." She said it bluntly and abruptly. (Oh man, she was so like, a _Valkyrie _or something). There was a small basket slung over her right shoulder, the strap lying against the fur of her hood.

"What's in the basket, Astrid?" Tuffnut demanded.

"Food for lunch. Go away. I'm meant to swap with you."

Snotlout preened himself. "_I _can stay, Astrid," he said, slinging an arm around her free shoulder. "You _know _that you'll need help-"

He didn't get further than that because she socked him in the jaw. _Ow. _Then she grabbed him the front of his shirt and hoisted him in the air until his face was level with hers.

Snotlout kept forgetting that she was three inches taller than him.

"Listen to me, Jorgenson," she snarled. Oh man, she looked _really _hot when she was angry. "I won dragon training. I beat you. I _thrashed _you. And if you even _think, _just for one _second _that you can harass me because of your sick obsession with me; just remember, I am capable of murdering you with no effort. And I'd be able to _get away with it. _So don't touch me, don't talk to me; don't even _look _at me. I am more capable of guarding the village from this woman than all of you _combined. _Sorry, guys," she added at the end, gesturing with her free hand to the other three Vikings.

Then she dropped him. Snotlout landed heavily on his butt.

_Ow. _Right on the tailbone.

"Come on, Snotlout," Ruffnut started walking to the gate, dragging her brother with her. "Astrid's in one of her moods."

It was true, she was even angrier than usual. Most of the time she treated each of them in a fairly friendly manner, but she was basically a wolf today.

"Yeah," Snotlout agreed.

"It's probably her monthly curse or something," Tuffnut snickered. Astrid's expression became so murderous that he immediately stopped laughing.

Astrid stood by the dragon rider until the others filtered through the small gap beneath the gate. Fishlegs took some time getting through it, Snotlout noticed with glee.

"Yeah, it's definitely her lady curse," Ruffnut said loudly.

Snotlout twisted his head in time to see Astrid glare at the other girl's back.

"Yeah, it's gotta be."

The gang started to laugh, leaving Astrid alone in the arena with the dragons and the rider.

* * *

><p> Thank you for reading, my fine followers. Unfortunately, I will not be updating as frequently as I'd like. (other fics cough). Please thoroughly enjoy.

If anyone is out of character, can you please let me know? My pet peeve is people not characterizing properly, and I don't want to be one of them :)

3. Chapter 3

Hello and thank you for waiting! Writer's block does horrible things, particular to my other fic. :(

* * *

><p>Valka watched the young Vikings leave the Kill Ring.<p>

She hadn't been surprised that the Kill Ring was still operational, but it was a blow nonetheless. She had had hopes that since Hiccup killed the Red Death, Berkians would find the Ring redundant after dragon attacks stopped.

But no. She should have known better. She could hear the caged dragons prowling in their cells, quiet growls and whimpers emanating maddeningly as the Vikings argued and talked around her.

The ringleader of the young Vikings, Snotlout, was the only one of the group that she had never met. Technically, Valka hadn't officially met any of them, considering they had all been babies when she and Hiccup left Berk with Cloudjumper, but Spitelout's son had not yet been born when they were taken.

She couldn't remember the names of the babies, just how many there were. All except for one, but even then it wasn't the correct name. She only remembered that child because that infant had been born exactly one month before she delivered Hiccup.

Valka had been sure the little girl's name was _Asta, _but apparently it was not, as she was now in the Kill Ring with a tall girl with the same blonde hair, but called _Astrid._

She'd been a pretty baby, Valka recalled. She cried a lot though, but not scared crying. _Angry _crying. That baby would grow up fierce.

As Valka tilted her head up and squinted through her mask's eyeholes at the girl, she realised that the caged dragons had stopped their plaintive cries of sorrow. Cloudjumper realised this too, as his tail began flicking in a motion Valka knew well. To trust? Or not to trust?

"Sorry about the other guys," Astrid said. "They're morons, but they can't help it." She put down her axe and knelt in front of Valka. "I'm Astrid," she said, "but you probably know that already thanks to Snotlout."

Valka smiled and nodded. She had been slightly irritated by Spitelout's son, but it seemed now that he annoyed everyone. "I did suspect tha' you might be."

"Yeah." The girl pulled her basket off her shoulder.

Valka's hand twitched cautiously. She was worried that the basket might contain some weapons to hurt Cloudjumper, but her dragon seemed to be curiously at ease. In fact, the Storm Cutter moved forward and sniffed Astrid's hands and the basket. The girl's hands twitched, but she ignored the dragon and opened the basket.

Fish.

Raw fish.

Valka tried to remember if Vikings usually ate raw seafood. But she couldn't believe she'd forget something like _that._

Cloudjumper leaned forward sniffed the fish quizzically. "No, there isn't any eel," Astrid said, pulling out a fish delicately and offering it to the Storm Cutter.

Valka smiled. _That _was why the caged dragons calmed down when the girl entered the arena. She looked after them.

Well, one ally was better than none. And Valka was feeling queasy at the thought that there was a very good chance the man who was once her husband would refuse to give her help.

"Tell me, have yeh ever ridden a dragon?"

Astrid didn't make a motion to say she was surprised by the question. She kept her eyes fixed on Cloudjumper as he took the fish from her hand.

"Yeah. I sometimes take the caged dragons for rides at night. You know, to give them a break from the cages. My favourite one's the Deadly Nadder, I call her Stormfly. And- _no, you can eat the whole thing-" _she stopped as Cloudjumper got ready to regurgitate part of his fish. "I'm not that good at it though."

Valka frowned behind her mask. "I thought yeh said yeh won dragon training." She knew the girl wasn't telling her the whole story.

Astrid retracted her hand and flushed. "I did. I used to be really- against dragons. I had my- _epiphany _a few weeks before I had to kill the Monstrous Nightmare." She sighed regretfully. "I'd planned to lose my place in dragon training so I wouldn't have to kill the Nightmare, but it was either me or Snotlout. Snotlout would have made it as painful as possible."

She picked up the basket and emptied the fish on the surface of the arena. "Anyway. I wasn't there when you first arrived and said why you were here, so I was just finding out what happened."

Astrid sat down properly and looked at Valka seriously.

"So what can we do about Hiccup?"

* * *

><p>Astrid made no motion as Valka flinched.<p>

"How do yeh know about Hiccup? How _long _have yeh known about Hiccup?" The woman seemed to be trying to work out whether or not to be horrified or pleased. She settled on a tone of doubtful wonder.

"Five years," Astrid replied. As the words left her mouth, she realised that it _had _been five years.

That was- wow. A quarter of her life spent training Stormfly and making sure her dragon wasn't killed and Astrid wasn't caught. A quarter spent stealing into the woods in the dark to meet Hiccup and to learn about dragons.

Among otherâ€¦| thingsâ€¦|

"But _how?" _the woman asked, aghast. "I told that boy to stay away from Berk! I told him Vikings were all the same."

Astrid bit her lip and tried not to feel offended. Valka's statement was close to truth, after all. "It wasn't _his _fault. He was just flying overhead and a bola took them out," she lied, scratching her thumb where the leather on her forearms and hands didn't quite reach. Hiccup most certainly had not just been flying overhead. Her mind returned to that night briefly, and she remembered the coldness interrupted by flares of heat from fire, screams and the sound of buildings being licked with flames. Hiccup (such an idiot) had been flying around, jumping on and off a wild Deadly Nadder and opening the cages in the Kill Ring, ripping open nets and trying to save dragons, before she; angered, had cast a bola, taking out both Hiccup and his dragon. Only the familiar scream of a Night Fury alerted her

to the fact that she had not taken down just _one _dragon. "I only found him later when I tried to kill the dragon."

"And he didn't attack yeh?"

"Well, _no,"_ Astrid said, aware she was sounding very slightly irritated. Why not, though? It was a bit of a dumb question. And _attacking _someone was so out of Hiccup's character that she was shocked that his _mother _of all people would assume he'd attacked someone. "That's not a Hiccup-like thing to do, is it? No, he took me flying."

"I meant the dragon, dear," Valka replied, a smile in her voice. "Tha' boy takes too much after me to attack someone. But tha' dragon, the Nadder he used to ride was very aggressive. He didn't attack yeh?"

Astrid felt her heart get heavier. "No. It was dead." When she'd first found Hiccup and Toothless, which had been _weeks _after the attack, there'd been the cold body of a Deadly Nadder rotting away there too. Hiccup had seemed very upset about it. He was distracted when she'd immediately tried to kill Toothless, but he'd reacted very quickly, leaping onto the dragon's back and pulling her up into the air.

She hadn't reacted all that well.

Valka looked at her sadly. "Ah. I was wondering what happened to him. Hiccup just came home very upset and with a _Night Fury, _so yeh can imagine I was a bit distracted for while." Her eyes glazed over slightly as she remembered the Nadder that Astrid had killed. "He wasn't the friendliest dragon, but he looked after Hiccup well."

Astrid shifted uncomfortably. She'd confess to shooting them down later, maybe when it was 100% positive that Valka trusted her. But for now—

She picked up a handful of gravel and started shifting it from hand to hand. "So Hiccup's trying to talk to Drago." The gravel emitted little puffs of dust when it landed in each hand. Astrid knew why Hiccup had to talk to Bludvist, but she was hoping his mother would say something that would contradict what Hiccup told her. She felt her hands give a little shake and she steeled herself. "Why?"

Valka tilted her head towards her, the spines of her headdress swaying with the motion. The mask was the creepiest thing Astrid had ever seen. She tried to imagine what her face looked like beneath it. When Hiccup had talked about his mother, she'd unconsciously thought of her as a female version of Stoick the Vast.

Of course, seeing her now, that was a completely stupid assumption, considering Hiccup's lankiness. She supposed she only thought it after Hiccup said he knew his father's name but not who he _was. _She didn't think he even knew now. She sure hadn't told him anything.

Astrid had tried to work out whether it was a good thing she hadn't told him the chief of Berk was his father. She'd settled on good, because knowing Hiccup, he was bound to do something spectacularly

stupid, like try to meet him or reunite his parents.

Yeah. It was probably a good thing.

"Drago Bludvist is raising a dragon army. He's been collecting and trapping dragons, some of mine included. They never come back. Hiccup thinks he can convince him to release them. That's why I came here. I assume yeh know that Toothless will do whatever Hiccup says, and I have no chance of convincing them to come back. But if Stoick and some Vikings forcibly take Hiccup and Toothless away, then he'll be safe."

Astrid let her gravel fall to the ground through her fingers. Oh, that was stupid.

"And you think his plan won't work?"

"I _know _it won't work."

Astrid tried to keep her temper in check. Hiccup's plan made so much _sense. _He'd convinced her to stop killing dragons, and if he had done that, why couldn't he convince this Drago? She knew him. And she knew Berk too. Hiccup was the kind of boy who could convince his father, _Stoick the Vast, _to stop killing dragons. In fact, Astrid was sure that if Hiccup tried to change Stoick's mind, it would happen.

"He convinced _me. _I think he can take on Drago. Why don't you have any faith in him?"

Valka hissed in irritation. "I _do. _But I also know when his plans won't work! It's _Hiccup. _He thinks the best of everyone! I know it will _nae_ _work."_

Astrid's face felt hot. "Have you even _tried?_"

"What do yeh _think _I did when I lived in Berk?"

"Well, apparently you didn't _do much._"

Cloudjumper looked up from the pile of fish steadily decreasing and gave a warning look at the two of them. It was ignored by both riders.

"Astrid, if yeh honestly believe tha' there was _anything _I could have done to change this stubborn lot's mindsâ€¦" Valka had adopted a fierce tone that contrasted so much with her previous kindly tenor it was hard to believe she was the same person.

"Hiccup could've!"

"People do nae change. I know, I tried," Valka said firmly.

"Then give them another chance!" Astrid said angrily. She could feel her fingers curling into fists, and it took all her effort to make them flatten out again. Hiccup had given her a chance. He could have had Toothless kill her the second she stepped into the cove. Toothless wouldn't have questioned it. He was so faithful, it had taken only a few weeks for Hiccup to completely gain the Night Fury's trust and to steal items from the forge to make a new tail.

He had chosen to take her flying. And in that one flight, _everything _Astrid thought she knew had changed. Dragons were not savage beasts that slaughtered innocents for fun. Vikings did not have to be enemies with dragons. Boys existed that were not complete turds like Tuffnut and Snotlout.

The latter she was actually almost the most surprised about.

And there was the fact that the night brought beauty. For her entire life before that life-changing night, night was to be feared for it brought uncertainty and the possibility of a dragon attack. But sitting on the back of a dragon, arms wrapped around a skinny boy for fear of falling off, she _saw. _

The clouds, up close. A lightning storm around her, lightning crackling and hot, thunder booming as Thor wielded Mjolnir, feeling the boy wrapped in her arms involuntarily shiver as the peals sounded louder. And then they were soaring upwards through the layer of clouds, getting wetter every second, everything growing dimmer and greyer, and then-

Stars. The flickers of fire, sparkling in the deep blue like thousands of fish in the ocean. She'd heard so many stories of what they were, the eyes of the gods, the souls of the deceased smiling down from Valhalla. There were _so many._

The glowing green lights reflected off the armour of the Valkyries, twisting in the wind, coiling like nothing she'd ever seen before, giving her the feeling of- appreciation? When she was young, the only thing the lights brought had been fear of the Flightmare. And after that, she'd been terrified of its return because of what it might do to her, like what it did to Uncle Finnâ€|

Then he'd returned her to the ground and begged her not to tell the other Vikings. And she'd agreed immediately, without guilt, without any feelings of doubt at what she was doing.

The others deserved that chance.

* * *

><p>By the time the twins came to relieve Astrid of her watching duties, the sun had already passed its peak in the sky and was settling down for late afternoon.<p>

And both Astrid and Valka had finished their argument, remained in irrational, childish silences before coming up with two plans as to what they would once Stoick had reached his decision.

They both assumed that Stoick had not come to his decision, as no one had come to tell them that it had happened. So, two plans.

The first was what they would do in the highly likely event that the chief would refuse to aid Valka. In that case, it was probably that Valka and Cloudjumper would remain in the Kill Ring overnight. If that were the case, Astrid would volunteer for guard, and during the night take Stormfly and they would both fly away to help Hiccup (who probably didn't need their help as the power of his words would undoubtedly persuade Drago to stop).

If Stoick the Vast _did _decide to help her, which was a highly dubious scenario of which both women were doubtful would occur, then Astrid would play along as a good little Viking until such time as they reached Drago. Then she would release Stormfly- they still had yet to decide as to how Astrid would go about convincing Stoick to bring a dragon on a longboat- and help release the other dragons Bludvist had taken, save Hiccup (_only if he hasn't managed to convince Drago, _Astrid thought, _which he probably will. So no worries about that_) and hopefully destroy the idea that dragons were enemies.

All that in one fell swoop.

What could possibly go wrong?

The second plan was put into not-action as the twins pranced along to Astrid and announced that Stoick had decided against helping Valka.

A small pit formed in Astrid's stomach as the twins delightedly informed her of this fact in difficult-to-follow sentences bursting to the seams with expletives. In her peripheral vision, she saw Valka's head dip slightly.

"Yeah, he said something. I think it was something like the 'best interests of Berkians' or something," Tuffnut drawled, adding far too many 'somethings' in than was necessary.

Ruffnut scowled, pulling away from the empty basket Astrid had brought for Cloudjumper. "Dude, did you eat _everything _you brought?" she asked irritably. The damp patch of ground the fish had been dumped on had since dried up, a fact of which Astrid was exceedingly grateful.

"Yeah. If you're so hungry, you should've brought something, it's not a charity," Astrid said. She snatched up the basket and her axe. "See you at sundown, have fun guarding her."

"Sundown?"

"Didn't you hear me? Yeah, I'm coming back to guard her later. Bye."

As Astrid left the ring, her mind was full of the plans.

Well, the second one clearly wasn't going to work.

First one it was, then.

* * *

><p>Hope you enjoyed! The next update will probably take longer, unfortunately. :(

4. Chapter 4

Oh hey, an update! Enjoy, guys.

* * *

><p>Gobber

Gobber was aware that something was up, but he couldn't quite wrap his mind around what it was. The dragon rider had, of course, raised his suspicions with her arrival, but it wasn't just _that._

He switched his axe appendage into his brush hand and absently brushed his moustache, lost in thought.

There wasâ€¦ something about her that sent alarm horns blaring through his mind. He was sure Stoick felt the same, she was a dodgy character that somehow seemed- familiar?

He sighed. Well, there was no point in worrying about it now, they'd have plenty of time later. He shouldn't waste time in the forge over this dragon rider.

As he once again replaced his missing hand with something more manageable, Gobber found that the sound of the village was making him uneasy.

Berk was loud, it always had been it would continue to be so until Ragnarok, he supposed. The crumbly paths would always be full of Vikings, whether joyful or at battles with dragons.

But the sound had changed. Gobber always felt at ease in the forge; it was his place, and he'd feel calm there even if Yggdrasil was collapsing. It was always loud and hot in there, but even running axe blades over the sharpening stone didn't block out the changes to the outside world.

He could still hear Vikings talking loudly, others hammering away at pieces of roof falling off, children running past the forge. But the tone was different. The casual manner that had once come to them so easily was gone. In its place uncomfortable forms of fear and confusion had reared up like the twin heads of a Hideous Zippleback.

It was understandable, really, that people would be reluctant to ignore the dragon rider in their midst, and would take time reverting to their usual behaviour, but it didn't mean Gobber had to like it.

He knew that a couple of children, earlier in the afternoon, had asked why they couldn't ride dragons. The idea that dragons were evil and could not be befriended was quickly and rightfully solidified in their minds.

The sooner that dragon rider problem was sorted out, the better, Gobber reckoned. Berk did not have time for emotional crises and dragon-befriending. Mostly because it was impossible and considering the bloody history between Vikings and dragons, it was surprising that not one or both of the species were extinct.

Gobber stopped the grinding stone and heavily out down the axe he had been sharpening. He couldn't concentrate. It was impossible.

He was thinking harder than he had in twenty years, which was

worrying him. Vikings had never needed intelligence, their brute strength was enough to bludgeon victory out of any enemy, no matter how smart they happened to be. It was a nice quality to have, but in contrast to forearms like tree trunks or the power to make grown men and women wet themselves, intelligence wasn't a trait that people generally went for.

But Gobber was intelligent in a way, whether he liked it or not, and as he roughly shoved the battle-axe onto a hook on the wall, he cursed this quality as ideas and questions feebly began to trickle through his mind.

Firstly, why did the dragon rider choose to come to _Berk? _It was a powerful village, no doubt about that, but the Meatheads (Gobber chastised himself for thinking that) were stronger and greater in number. It was just fortunate they had an uneasy alliance with Berk. If she wanted some Vikings to drag away her wayward spawn, then it would have made plenty more sense for her to head over to them. Thuggory was reckless enough to agree with the plan.

Gobber's thinking became quicker. Obviously the woman decided that there was something about- or someone on- Berk that made his village a better place to seek help from.

Possibly she had been friends with someone? Maybe she was from a neighbouring tribe, but couldn't go back. Perhaps she was from _Berk._

The last thought made him snort, and he pulled the axe back off the wall. Not much chance of that.

As he got back to sharpening the axe, he thankfully noticed that the sound of the metal shrieking against the stone blocked out all sounds of Berk.

He felt uneasy anyway. He was missing something, he _knew _he was, something that was so glaringly obvious that it would come back to bite him without him even seeing the strike until it was too late.

* * *

><p>Snotlout

Snotlout stared into the sea and rubbed his nose angrily. He got that Astrid was totally tough and hot and everything, but was it necessary to bruise his face? Good-looks didn't grow on trees.

He didn't _get _her.

Any other Viking girl would be delighted for him to show interest in them. Like, he was powerful, he was strong, he was really good-looking and he was going to be _chief. _What wasn't there to like? Like, come _on._

What was he doing wrong?

Astrid was tough. She was brave. Wouldn't she want a tough, brave, hot dude? She was ambitious too, and if she married him, then she'd be the wife of the chief. That was like awesome.

Why wasn't she interested? Why didn't she like him?

Snotlout, a boy who had gotten everything he had wanted since he was a child, preened and prepared for a life of chiefting, was angry because he wasn't getting what he wanted. Toys and swords were _easy _to get, he could bully the others and the younger Vikings because they couldn't do anything. But now there was one thing that he wanted, and he wasn't going to get it.

And there was only so many punches from Astrid he could take. Just as there was only three times he could propose.

Sometimes he liked being a Viking, because it meant that he could do basically whatever he wanted. But in this case, the one thing he _couldn't _do was force Astrid to marry him.

By law, if she rejected him one more time, he wouldn't be allowed to ever mention the subject again. He wouldn't be able to flirt at her, hit on her, _anything, _unless she came to him and expressed that she had changed her mind and would marry him. And there wasn't much chance of that happening.

He moodily glared at the ocean. Why the Hel was there good weather when he was in such pain? The pain of rejectionâ€¦ it was so much worse than anything a dragon could do to a Viking. Give him a dismembered limb any day.

It was times like these that he wished he lived on that damp island called Englandâ€¦ or was it Scotland? Whatever it was, they didn't seem to have a problem with forcing girls into marriages. And right now, that was what he desperately wanted to do.

He was going to be _chief. _Snotlout couldn't afford to look stupid and single in front of the village. And the only other single girl his age was Ruffnut Thorstonâ€¦

Actually, that was an idea. If when he proposed to Astrid she refused him, Ruffnut was the next target. She'd happily become wife of the chief, he knew that. She liked attention, good or bad.

Of course, Astrid was still his first choice. So he had to get into her good books. He scratched his feeble beard and tried to think.

It was Astrid. If she was anything like him (and he was sure she was, that was why they would go so well together), she'd want other people to admit she was right.

Snotlout pried a piece of bread out of his beard and flicked it into the ocean. An apology was good, right?

Yeah. An apology, what else would be good.

Flowers?

Fish?

A new axe?

She didn't like flowers, she obviously had enough fish considering the size of the basket she brought to the Kill Ring, and she was

fiercely protective of her axe.

He sighed and stood. He'd start with an apology (Odin, that was gonna be hard), and think about a proper gift later.

Then Snotlout headed off to Astrid's, confident his plan would work.

* * *

><p>Astrid

For a few seconds, perhaps, the room appeared empty and peaceful. Of course, not for long.

A knife and a shirt went sailing across the room into a patch of dying sunlight just in front of the window.

Astrid was standing at her chest of all her worldly possessions and was throwing everything out behind her in the hopes of finding that _one important thing._

Where _was _it?

A binder and a roll of leather for her forearms joined the steadily growing pile by the window.

Honestly, it hadn't even been that long since she had put it in there! When was the last time she had seen Hiccup? One week? Two?

However long it was, it could _not _be lost or at the bottom of the chest. However, there was certainly something-

"_Ow_" Astrid hastily yanked her hand out of the chest to examine a ring of teeth marks along her palm. A few drops of blood pricked the broken surface of her skin. More carefully this time round, she shoved her hand in and extracted a Terrible Terror by the tail. "Snack!" she yelled. "That hurt!"

Snack the Terrible Terror made an indignant squeaking sound and tromped over onto the window sill, leaving claw marks in the walls as he climbed up.

Snack was an obnoxious dragon with a stupid name. Astrid could proudly say that she had not been the one to name him. Snack was the Terror that had once lived in the Kill Ring with the others, but he'd escaped just after Astrid met Hiccup. He'd been able to smell Toothless or something, because he tracked them down and joined them. Hiccup thought Snack was hilarious and adorable and had promptly named him. And then he'd left Snack to be trained by Astrid.

To say that Snack hadn't taken to Astrid all that well was an understatement. He remembered her quite well from dragon training, and he hated her for it. She couldn't exactly tell the little dragon that she regretted her (very recent) behaviour, and Snack (justly, she thought) held it against her. It took weeks for him to stop snapping at her hands, and it had been months before he allowed her to pet him.

And now he lived in her chest. Which he was quite sure was his property, despite to Astrid's exasperated attempts at making him move, most of which ended with Astrid nursing a bitten hand, shooting daggers at the Terrible Terror.

How times had changed—or not.

Astrid wiped her bleeding hand on the material between the spikes on her skirt and plunged back into the chest.

She really needed to find her saddle.

It wasn't necessary; she mostly flew without it because she didn't have enough time to put it away before it was dawn after a night of flying. And she wasn't even flying very far; it was just to give the dragons a bit of exercise before they had to be locked up as the first few Vikings emerged from their dens.

But if she and Valka were leaving to save Hiccup from a situation that he most likely had a handle on, she wanted to use the saddle. For two reasons, really.

One: It was probably going to be a long flight, and she wasn't certain her backside would survive that long on Stormfly's scaly hide. Soft leather saddle, please.

Two: Hiccup had made it and she really, really liked it. He had a talent for those sort of things; he made his own armour from a combination of shed dragon scales and stolen leather varnished with—something. Presumably dragon saliva. And he had constructed an artificial tailfin for Toothless out of supplies he had stolen over a period of two or so weeks; he'd built himself an artificial leg after he fought the Green Death—he had done so much. Basically, he was a genius. And Astrid trusted whatever he made, and he _had _stated the saddle would be good for long distance, so—

How could it _possibly _be so deep in the chest? Astrid stole a glance out of the window as she rummaged about, feeling alarmed as behind Snack, she saw that the light was dying and the sun was sinking into the ocean.

Pushing past an old skull from her skirt, her fingers came into contact with a soft leathery surface.

Bingo.

As Astrid hauled out the saddle, she couldn't help admiring it. She always did. But Hiccup's craftsmanship was something one didn't just look over. It was made almost _perfectly. _Perhaps a Viking like Gobber would point out some flaws in it, but it did its job and it did its job well. (And come on, Hiccup wasn't perfect. Nothing was.) And it wasn't as if Hiccup had spent the twenty years of his life as the apprentice of some blacksmith. It was all his own invention.

And to Astrid, this made it better.

It would have been understandable if the saddle was just a plain leather seat with soft belts to tie around Stormfly, but Hiccup—or well, for him, everything had to be fancy. That was why the saddle had patterning stitched (remarkably neatly) everywhere. When he had

first handed it to Astrid, grinning like an idiot, it had looked like tiny scratches along the leather. A second look made her realise he had stitched tiny, _tiny _dragons in flight all over the saddle. And it was _beautiful. _He'd even made small spikes that matched her skirt on all the straps out of a strangely light metal he claimed was 'Gronkle Iron'.

What a perfectionist. A simple saddle would have done.

Astrid gently placed the saddle on her bed and started picking up her belongings strewn around the room. Snack picked up a leather gauntlet in his mouth and 'helpfully' placed it back in the chest, leaving strings of drool dangling from it.

Then the most unwelcome person possible stuck his head through the window.

Snotlout had always irritated her. He was to become the chief of Berk, but it was hard to believe that the village would be run by such an arrogant, self-absorbed bully. Her annoyance at him and started from when they were children (rivals, not friends), but she had become his begrudging friend as Fishlegs was pushed out of the group as they became older. He had _never _stopped hitting on her, and that as well as his grotesquely egotistical personality had made her almost flinch whenever he came near her.

And when he first proposed the subject of marriageâ€¦ she had difficulty hiding her disgusted expression, feeling a little sorry for him as she rejected him. Astrid had hoped that it would convince him to back off, but he hadn't changed at _all. _In fact, he became more reckless and conceited than ever.

"Hey Astrid," Snotlout said, in an uncharacteristically apologetic tone. "I just wanted to say sorry forâ€¦ you know, stuff."

Astrid shifted to block his view of the saddle and allowed her eyebrow to slowly trek up her forehead. Snotlout? Apologising? The two didn't go together.

"What stuff?"

"Wellâ€¦" She could see the tiny cogs in his brain ticking agonisingly slowly. She could also see the little light that remained outside darkening. She _had _to get back to the Ring. "For, um, beingâ€¦" Snotlout fumbled for words. "Too good?" he suggested.

"Go away, Snotlout." There had been a brief chance she was going to accept the apology, but considering how _genuine _it was (or, 'not at all'), and her growing worry about-

"Hey, what's that thing?" Snotlout asked, leaning further in to the window to look around Astrid at her bed.

Oh, Odin's missing eye, this was not good. If only she lived in the loft.

"Is it a saddle?" He said, screwing his face up.

Oh no, oh no, oh noâ€¦ How was she meant to get out of this? Thor or Loki or _someone, please _help her get out of thisâ€¦

"We don't have any horses on Berk, though," he said stupidly.

Horses! Thank you Loki!

"I asked Trader Johann to bring me a horse from England," she lied. "I bought the saddle last time, and I've been saving up for a horse. I think it'd be cool to ride a horse"

It wasn't even a remotely decent lie, but it seemed to do the trick. Snotlout shrugged. "Yeah, that'd be cool. It's like _so _you! Anyway, see you later, babe," he said, and left.

He left. Oh, thank the gods and goddesses, he _left._

* * *

><p>Actual action-y stuff will probably be happening soon. Hopefully. :) Not sure when the next update will happen, though.

5. Chapter 5

This was written a little quicker than I anticipated, which is odd considering it was the hardest to write.

* * *

><p>Tuffnut

For example, standing in an arena for several hours with no one but a silent dragon rider and her snobby, pretentious dragon was not exactly the best for their relationship. Multiple arguments had occurred while the woman looked on and her dragon sniffed a random patch of perfectly normal ground.

"Why are you, like, literally so dumb?" Ruffnut snarled. Tuffnut couldn't even remember what they were arguing about, but he wasn't going to let her _win. _

"Only when I'm better than you!" he yelled back. Definitely not the best comeback, but it was still better than anything Snotlout could come up with. It didn't even make sense.

Ruffnut obviously thought so too. "That doesn't make sense!" she shouted back, raising a fist for some reason. Maybe to punch him in the face.

"Will you guys just _shut up _for once?" A new voice interrupted. Tuffnut spun around, mouth still open to hurl abuse at his sister, but Astrid's cold expression stopped him dead in his tracks.

Astrid was just about the only person who scared him, her and Stoick the Vast. The latter was intimidating. The former was terrifying.

She'd once been his friend, but after she'd won Dragon Training, she'd become moodier and distant. Now she was basically a force of

pure terror. Forget about dragons; Tuffnut would rather be eaten by one than get into Astrid's black books.

She was carrying something big, but he couldn't see what it was as sun had gone down completely. It looked like it was covered in a blanket. Her axe was slung on the top, a haphazard pile of blankets and weaponry.

"What's that?" he immediately demanded.

"Blankets, you munge-bucket," Astrid replied, shoving him out of the way. "You can all go now. I got this."

She was acting suspiciously, of course, but Tuffnut found that he just didn't care.

"C'mon Ruff," he said, their recent argument forgotten. "Let's go eat stuff."

* * *

><p>Valka

As Valka helped Astrid fit the saddle onto the Deadly Nadder (_Stormfly_, she reminded herself), she immediately could see that there was something very different with how it was designed. She had been concerned that the saddle would hurt the dragon; Berkian designs were rough and only practical. But this saddle was soft leather, perfectly made to accommodate the Nadder's spines, and designed with a delicacy that was not possible on her old island. It took minimal examination of it to realise it was one of Hiccup's creations.

It seemed to be an awful lot for her son to make for a friend. Especially a friend that lived on one of the most dangerous places she or her son could ever go to.

"He likes yeh, don't he," she asked, although it wasn't really a question. And she meant a little more than 'like'.

"Yeah, I'm his friend, aren't I?" the young Viking answered, but avoiding Valka's gaze as she stared at the straps and buckles, fitting them around Stormfly. "And we'd better hurry up. I think my dad will probably come to check on me. It's getting dark."

It was dark, and the fires in the village some distance away had started up, wisps and curls of smoke lazily climbing in the sky, barely visible against the night. So Valka let the conversation go.

Although she retained her suspicions.

* * *

><p>Gobber

"Didja know Astrid's getting a horse?" Snotlout asked as he sat heavily down next to Tuffnut.

"What?" Ruffnut said. "That's dumb. What does she want a horse for? And she'd need a saddle."

Snotlout reached out a hand and grabbed a leg of mutton from Tuffnut's plate. The skinnier boy let out an indignant squawk and made a snatch for it back, but Snotlout sent an 'I'm-future-chief' look his way. "She's got one," he said between mouthfuls. "It's really big. Like _that _big." He stretched out his hands to show just how big it was.

"That's too big fer a horse," Gobber said, passing by with a mug of mead. "Horses are smaller. About half the size o' a Nadder."

Really, the only young Vikings that had any brains were Fishlegs and Astrid. And brains weren't even valued, but it was better than talking to this lot. Thick and stupid; the most obvious things flew past them on gaudy wings, but still remained invisible to them.

"That's like the same size as the pile of blankets she took to the Kill Ring," Ruffnut pointed out blandly, drowning the remaining words as she downed some mead.

Gobber stopped dead. Then he turned and stomped back to the table. The conversation had changed slightly in the few seconds that took, the comment practically forgotten. Considered unimportant and uninteresting.

"What did yeh say, Ruffnut?" Gobber barked, looming over the top of the gang.

Ruffnut uneasily looked up at her old teacher. "I said the saddle thing Snotlout said he saw was the same size as some blankets and stuff she brought to the Kill Ring." Her face, as well as her brother's and the future chief's, had bemused expressions painted on.

Astrid. Saddle. Dragons. "Oh, Thor almighty," Gobber said as he realised what was going on.

"What? What?" Snotlout demanded. Ruffnut and Tuffnut stared at Gobber with equally confused expressions.

Gobber found himself feeling increasingly frustrated at the stupidity of the three teens. How _couldn't _they make the connection? Kill Ring. Dragons. Saddle-that's-obviously-not-for-a-horse. Astrid.

She was _working _for the Dragon Woman. Or at least intended to help her escape. Why else would she volunteer to guard so many times? Why would she have a saddle?

Why hadn't she killed a dragon for five years? Berk's best and newest fighter, leaving the battles to others.

Leaving the dragons aloneâ€¦

Gobber became aware of so many more things that he had dismissed in months and years before. Astrid always being at the Kill Ring so early in the morning. The dragons always appearing fed, even though he sure as Hel wasn't doing it, and no one else seemed to be. The beasts were more peaceably when the girl was around.

They _liked _her.

"Nothin'," he grunted in reply. "I need to talk to the chief."

He stumped away, fears and doubts running through his mind, second-guessing everything Astrid had done in her short life. Somewhere distant, he was aware that his mead was spilled all down his front, but this matter was so much more serious than a spilled drink.

The chief was sitting at his usual head of one of the multiple tables, stained and burnt as usual, and Stoick smiled at Gobber as the older man approached.

"Ah, Gobber!" Stoick greeted, all traces of his anger and sadness gone. Gobber wondered if he had forgotten the Dragon Rider, or had pushed back the sore memories, or was drunk. Probably the latter, considering Stoick's flushed face, looking happier than he had in a while.

Stoick never got drunk unless he really was in pain. So the chief had not forgotten the incidents with the dragons, and was just trying to suppress the sadness he had retained since that day twenty years ago. Gobber sat heavily beside him, the last few dregs of his mead spilling over the side of his mug.

"Stoick, the teens told me somethin' important. They do nae understand it, but Astrid Hofferson is working with the Dragon Rider." Might as well get to the point. Drunk men and women didn't tend to listen to long explanations.

Understandably enough, Stoick laughed. Long and loud. Far too long, in fact, it wasn't even a particularly funny concept. "Astrid? I can't think o' someone less likely to do tha'!" he managed to say after putting a break in his laughter by swigging some mead.

"It makes sense, Stoick. She's been volunteering to guard at the Kill Ring, and she has nae killed a dragon since she won Dragon Training. I think she's riding them too!"

Stoick laughed even harder. Erik Hofferson walked over to join in the conversation at the sound of laughter.

"What's so funny?" he asked, swaying slightly. Obviously he'd had a bit much to drink as well.

"Gobber here thinks yer daughter is working for the dragon rider woman," Stoick choked out. Erik joined in with a howl of laughter.

"She's been seen with a saddle!" Gobber yelled. "And I know for a fact she did nae get it from Trader Johann, I asked for one meself last visit!" Stoick had always listened to Gobber, and now when it was most important, he was _drunk._

If only there was something that would snap him out of it. Mentioning Valka, or Hiccup or the dragon rider- oh.

And suddenly everything became clear to Gobber.

The dragon rider. And why she was so familiar.

Her voice. The content of her words. Her familiarity. For the first time he realised that when she first arrived, she had addressed both Stoick and Gobber.

And they hadn't even told her their names.

How could she have known?

She knew about his prosthetic. She knew what it had looked like twenty years ago. She knew he worked in the forge.

The dragon. Stoick was absolutely positive that was the dragon that killed his wife and son. And suddenly it was loyal to a woman about the same age as the chief's missing wife, a woman with a son

A twenty year old son.

It was Valka.

It _had _to be.

* * *

><p>Stoick

Stoick laughed harder than he had in years.

Astrid Hofferson. The toughest woman on Berk.

Working with a filthy _dragon _rider.

The concept was- just incredible. Especially coming from _Gobber, _of all Vikings.

Stoick could see his friend getting more frustrated with every passing second, but he was experiencing a lightness that he hadn't felt in a long time. And he didn't want to let it go.

It was a chief's duty to remain sober for his people, but this one night could do without him. He needed to get away. He had to, or he'd go insane. Twenty years' worth of suppressed despair, and when he was in a position to let it all loose, he could only laugh.

Gobber was going to say something, he could see it on his friend's face. And he knew whatever he was going to say, the only reply would be laughter.

"Valka is the dragon woman!" Gobber screamed in frustration.

Whatever Stoick had expected Gobber to say, it wasn't that. His smile slipped.

The drunken happiness was gone again.

"Get the others," he commanded, suddenly sober. An icy feeling in his stomach was apparent, cold and full of doubt. "We're going to the Ring. Now."

* * *

><p>Valka

"They're coming!" Astrid shouted. Valka spun and saw lights from the burning torches growing as they came closer. Shouts accompanied them, angry and loud and piercing.

"We must leave the Ring!" Valka yelled at the girl, who nodded and began hoisting the gate open. She was such a skinny girl, but she was made of pure compacted muscle. It appeared to take no effort for her to open the gate.

Valka stole another look at the lights. The Vikings were awfully close, and they were moving fast.

"Out! Get out now!" Astrid screamed. Stormfly made a chirping sound and ran, bird-like, out of the arena. Cloudjumper and Valka followed immediately. Astrid used her foot to kick her axe under the gate and then ducked under it herself.

It slammed shut with an ominous clang.

The girl hesitated, looking back the Ring. That was her life, everything she had ever done and learned was on this island. And now she was giving it up for a stranger and her son. Valka felt pity, but her awareness of a relationship between Astrid and Hiccup allowed her to not feel guilty. The girl knew what she was doing. She knew who she was doing it for. A friend. Or possibly moreâ€| Valka was determined to find out.

"Astrid!" She shouted. She pointed at the figures of the Vikings, which were recognizable now. It was Stoick (her heart gave painful shudder), Gobber, Erik Hofferson, the young Vikingsâ€|

It was stupid to have thought they would have been able to leave so easily. But it was too late now to stop. And she valued the life of her son over Berk. Over everything and everyone.

* * *

><p>Stoick

Stoick could see the two women, clambering up the side of dragons. Astrid was moving faster than he had ever seen her, even in Dragon Training and on raids. The rider moved in a familiar wayâ€| _everything _was familiar with her, the way she had spoken, what she had said, the way she ran and walkedâ€|

Why couldn't he have seen it before?

Astrid and her Nadder took off into the air, the dragon shrieking and dodging as Snotlout furiously threw a bola, but the girl and the creature rose higher and higher until they were lost from all view, vanished into the clouds.. The woman was a little slower, but moved with infinitely more grace and agility. She didn't even need a saddle, she merely used her staff to hook onto the dragon's body.

His heart hammered so painfully in his chest; old memories and fears and hopes were reawakening and devouring him. If it was her, his family was alive, but kept from him for so many yearsâ€| and if not, his son and his wife were dead.

"Valka!" he yelled after her. His voice choked out at first, so he shouted it louder, louder than the Stormcutter's crow to its mistress, louder than Snotlout's angry scream.

He hadn't been sure whether she would react, perhaps twenty years of isolation had made her lose awareness of her name. Or she was too far above them to hear. But she gave a visible shiver, nearly slipping off her dragon, and her head turned towards them.

Stoick stared upwards at his disappearing wife, taken by the same dragon that had split his soul all those years ago.

"VALKA!" he screamed after her, doubt and anger and so many other emotions mixed in with his voice. "VALKA!"

The dragon stopped rising and hovered in the air. Valka, looking more like a dragon than a person, shouted back down, almost inaudible.

"I'm so sorry, Stoick."

The bleeding light from the torches couldn't illuminate her any longer, and she disappeared into the inky night.

Twenty years ago, when his screaming wife and child had been carried away by a dragon, he had not known what to do.

He had known to mourn, of course, and he had continued his duties as chief.

But what could he have done?

What could he have done?

Stoick could have remarried. There were all too many women who would have gladly married the chief and provided him with an heir.

But he didn't want one. He didn't want a replacement. Hiccup was his heir, his only heir, and fathering another child felt like a betrayal to his infant son.

His brother's unborn child would be the heir. He would continue the line of royalty, and he would rule Berk. But that felt like a betrayal too.

He had decided on remaining a widower. Anything else would have been like bundling up the memories of his wife and child and throwing them away for a different woman and a child that he could never truly call his.

And what a betrayal to the replacement child it would have been. Every look Stoick would have cast to it would have amidst thoughts of what Hiccup would have been like, what he would have looked like, would he have been a better child.

Stoick just couldn't do that.

He had not known what he was to do.

But now, watching his wife disappear again, he remembered why she had come back to them.

To seek help.

To save her _son._

Stoick's thick knees wobbled, but he refused to let it show. He felt Gobber's hand pat his back, but it barely registered.

Hiccup.

A dizzying feeling of relief came over Stoick, swamping him and nearly suffocating him, but he didn't care, he didn't care at all.

He had always imagined what he would say to Hiccup if the boy miraculously returned to life. Awkward things that seemed stupid and insincere even in his mind. So he had just thought about what his boy would look like. Tall, strong. Built like himself, but slightly skinnier to match his mother's build, and a face like Valka's, completed with Stoick's red mane. Clever and witty. A force of pure power.

And he no longer had to imagine. His flesh and blood was alive, breathing, running, speaking and living like he should, as he deserved.

A life amongst dragons.

The giddy feeling began to dissipate, and a far more fearful sensation took over him.

What would Hiccup be like?

A- a _monster, _twisted by his years of growing with dragons; no better than an animal, savage and-

No, wait.

What had Valka said Hiccup was doing?

Why had she come to seek help from them in the first place?

Because her- _their _son needed help. To save him from Drago Bludvist and himself.

The boy was trying to _reason _with Drago.

His son was not an animal.

His son was intelligent.

Memories of what Valka had said ran through his mind like they were being chased.

What had she said when Gobber questioned Hiccup's intelligence? _He's done a better job wha' with his leg in five years than _yeh _have in twenty!_

Hiccup was missing a limb. By a dragon no doubt, and yet the boy was determined to protect and provide for them.

Pride surged through Stoick. Not for defending the dragons, but the fact was, this boy whom he had never met was a worthier chief than Snotlout Jorgenson would ever be.

And for the first time in so many years, Chief Stoick the Vast of Berk changed his mind.

* * *

><p>Phew! Not the best writing, but that was the beginning of the more action parts of the story! Stay tuned.

6. Chapter 6

Not the longest chapter. Also, I'm bumping up the rating to a T, sort of descriptions of gore. Not sure when the next update will be!

* * *

><p>Astrid

The frigid air was icy against Astrid's cheeks. Stormfly was flying just fast enough to squeeze out a few tears from the wind, which promptly froze on her cheeks. Every blink or squint against the gusts crunched the ice forming, little snowy shards blowing behind in her wake like leaves falling from trees.

"Valka?" she yelled against the rush of cold air. When Astrid took to the clouds, she hadn't seen or heard Hiccup's mother follow behind. Even when she'd breached the layer of clouds, up where she could see the stars in a canopy, Valka was not to be seen. "Where are-?"

A light hand on her shoulder nearly made her scream, and she spun around to punch the offender, but found herself staring into the eye sockets of Valka's mask. Astrid lowered her fist and let out a breath. A puff of cloud drifted away from her mouth. The woman was hanging upside down from her Stormcutter's back, holding on only to her staff, which was hooked around the dragon.

"Sorry, Astrid," Valka said, sounding a little shaky, but remarkably calm for someone that was upside down hundreds of feet in the air. "I was held back a little, if yeh must know."

_No, _Astrid thought. They were a team. And she wanted to know why Valka, a grown woman who was strong enough to raise a child alone, intelligent enough to understand dragons, was sounding all tremble-y. It obviously couldn't be from the height. Valka didn't strike her as a woman who would purposely dangle from a dragon's back if she were afraid of heights.

"How come?" Astrid pressed. Cloudjumper swooped down to Stormfly's

level, and Valka hooked herself back up onto his back.

Valka sighed loudly and took off her mask, rubbing her eyes. She had a narrow face, surprisingly unworn for her age. Lots of brown hair, tied back haphazardly into braids. Prominent cheekbones made her cheeks look even thinner. Astrid could practically see Hiccup staring out of her face, but she also could now fully appreciate how much of Hiccup had been taken from Stoick. The nose. The eyes. The red tint in his messy hair. Before, she thought they had looked completely different.

"He recognised me," Valka said, her hands twitching around the mask in her grasp. "He yelled my name up at me. I did nae think they'd realise; I was so _stupid_." Her eyes were darting around worriedly. "How could they _nae? _I lived with them for twenty years! Yeh memories of me wouldn'ta just disappearedâ€|"

Cloudjumper let out a small puzzled growl and twisted his head around like an owl's to look at his rider.

"What've I _done?_" Valka gasped. Astrid felt herself steadily growing more alarmed as the woman became more agitated. Hiccup's mother balanced her mask precariously on Cloudjumper's hide and buried her face in her hands. "What will they _do? _ Stoick might take his anger out on _Hiccup! _What if he helps Drago tae spite me?"

Astrid narrowed her eyes. Now Valka was just being silly.

"Valka."

"I can _see _that happenin', he must _hate _me for the last twenty years-"

"Valka!"

"Oh _please, _if he'd just shout or scream or _something-_"

"_Valka!_" Astrid screamed. The woman lifted her head from her hands and stared at her.

"What?"

Astrid picked off a piece of ice from her cheek and spoke.

"Valka, you haven't been to Berk for a long time. You haven't seen _Stoick _for a long time. Years, in fact."

Valka nodded.

"Therefore, you have no idea how he's gonna react."

She opened her mouth to argue, but Astrid cut her off.

"Maybe you knew him well twenty years ago. But remember, _twenty years _have passed. You think he's gonna be the same?"

Valka stared off into the distance. The stars did look very nice over

where she was staring, but Astrid didn't particularly care.

"People change! People always do. I bet he's angry now, but I think underneath it all, he's just really happy that the two of you aren't dead."

"How would yeh-"

"Maybe you knew Stoick when you married him," Astrid interrupted irritably, "but _I'm _the one who's been living in the same village as him for twenty years. I know what he's like."

Valka's tense shoulders seemed to relax a fraction.

"I mean, thinking that you and Hiccup were dead _broke _him. He didn't get remarried or anything. My bet is he thought it was traitorous to you, to do that."

The older woman's thin mouth curled into an expression that Astrid couldn't understand.

"He is _not _going to murder Hiccup; that's ridiculous to think. If he's angry, he will come and yell at _you, _and then get over it. Probably not quickly, but he will. He values you two more than his pride, you realise?"

Valka didn't answer.

"Yeah, he will be angry. It was really insensitive to just come to Berk like that, _with Cloudjumper. _Maybe _you _though he'd gotten over your 'deaths', but he _hadn't. _He's known for the entirety of Hiccup's _life _what kind of dragon took you two."

Cloudjumper let out an annoyed whine.

"I'm talking to your rider. Stoick was never going to just 'get over it'. He loved you! And I know that if _Hiccup _was taken away from me, I wouldn't just_-"_

"Hiccup?" Valka asked.

Astrid almost stopped breathing. The cold started to smother her.

Stupid.

Stupid stupid stupid.

"Yeh were talking about love, why-"

When realisation hit Valka, she groaned and threw her head back.

"Um, yeah," Astrid said sheepishly. She wondered how much Valka thought had happened. "It's mutual."

And she was _so _glad that it was. She'd almost slapped herself when she'd kissed him for the first time and his dumb freckly face was so confused. She'd had to explain what it meant (the most embarrassing few minutes in her existence), and Hiccup had just stared at her

dumbfounded, a look of giddy surprise on his face, until he'd kissed her back.

She nearly snorted out loud at the memory, even though it was one of the best she had.

Valka stared at Astrid for a solid minute. The younger girl meekly combed her bangs with her fingers so her view of Valka was blocked. The woman's gaze was intimidating.

Ugh, but why did she make that slip? She should be more careful. What if Valka refused to- No. Astrid was thinking as unreasonably as Valka had been mere minutes ago.

_Muscle up, Astrid, _she thought. _You're a grown woman. No time to be irrational._

Valka let out a very audible sigh. Astrid dared a glance at her, and she just looked slightly resigned, but not angry or disappointed.

"It was always going tae happen," Valka reasoned. "Hiccup's twenty, I can't keep him in a cage forever. I'm just glad it was yeh he fell for. Yer a nice girl. Sensible." She gave Astrid a sheepish smile. "Thank yeh for reassuring me about Stoick."

"You're welcome," Astrid said, hopelessly relieved by her reaction. "Thanks for not pushing me off Stormfly or something because I'm your baby's girlfriend."

"I would _nae _do that," Valka said aghast. Then she shrugged. "Well, I'd catch yeh at least."

The two shared a smile.

As they flew on, Astrid realised that maybe there was going to be a happy end. Hiccup and Valka moving back to Berk, the chief's family reunited, peace with dragons.

Maybe that was going to happen.

Unbeknownst to her, Astrid's dream was being put into effect.

* * *

><p>Gobber

A colossal crash shook the air as Gobber emptied his arms of weapons into the longboat. Blades and axes and spares tumbled into a pile.

He really should have expected Stoick's reaction.

A wife and son returning from the dead was not a small thing. Especially the Valka and Hiccup, the family of one of the greatest chiefs Berk had ever been fortunate to have.

Stoick had appeared infuriated when Valka and Astrid disappeared into the night sky on the backs of dragons, and Gobber was fully prepared to drag him away kicking and screaming like a child, but he'd

surprised everyone.

He started laughing.

He had started _laughing._

It couldn't have been the alcohol; if Stoick decided he wasn't going to be drunk anymore, then he wasn't and even he couldn't change it back.

Then he had immediately ordered the village to begin preparations for war.

"Drago Bludvist is a maniac," he had declared. "And if Astrid Hofferson thinks the best option of survival is going to fight him, than that is what we should do."

The villages pretended that was the reasoning behind Stoick's logic, even though it was glaringly obvious it was because of the return of his son and wife.

And now Gobber was piling weapons up in the longboats. He looked up to the village where Stoick was cheerfully preparing for a gruesome and bloody battle. The smile scrawled across his face had barely faltered in all the time since Valka's reappearance.

Despite Stoick's cheer, and the fact that he hadn't smiled that wide since his wedding, Gobber felt a shiver shake his shoulders. He had only felt in when the Boneknapper dragon had been about to strike, but it was nowhere in sight, and he was sure it was nothing to do with the dragon that had stalked him since he was a teen.

He knew something was going to happen, something awful; there was a chill set into Berk that was not going away.

* * *

><p>Miles away, it was far colder than Berk, or even in the sky where Astrid and Valka soared.<p>

A thick layer of snow smothered the earth, obliterating any possible plant life that may have once been there. Any animals that had once been there had taken one look at the new inhabitants, thought 'this isn't worth it', and scampered away, leaving the new arrivals with a desolate wasteland of snow.

The snow wasn't even white anymore; flakes of charcoal had softly settled into the blindingly bright surface, sinking in and spreading out until there wasn't the slightest speck of silvery sand, just a dull grey colour. A scent was present; the smell of smoke, decay and blood.

This was the doing of Drago Bludvist.

He had claimed that land, and the absence of humans on it had allowed him to take over the entire fortress of ice; using the cove as the base of his operations. The smoke was from the furnaces going constantly, churning out armour and weapons in an onslaught of iron.

The decay and blood were from the dragons.

They were trapped in huge numbers, enclosed in cages like fanged mouths. They whined and growled at Drago's forces, unwilling to use their brute power for his gain. But what choice did they have really? It was cooperate or be _forced _to. An Alpha dragon was hardly going to allow them to leave, or to stand back and watch the battles commence.

The weaker perished quickly. They couldn't handle the iron shields, the helmets welded onto their scales, screwed in with great iron bolts. One day that would be moaning in discomfort and pain, the next their carcasses would be as cold as the snow around them. As the cadavers rotted, the other dragons found themselves forced to eat the festering remains of their own.

Some of the ones that couldn't be controlled, even by the Bewilderbeast, were slaughtered by the creatures with weaker minds. These bodies too were added to the piles of corpses, the survivors meekly tearing chunks of flesh from their kin to satisfy the hunger that was always present.

The horror of their surroundings did not go over the heads of Drago's crew. The blood and stench of hideously abused beasts were all they could think of night and day. It was just the reactions to them that changed.

Some, those who had lost siblings, parents, friends and lovers to dragons enjoyed the suffering, enjoyed the pitiful moans of the creatures shut up in the dark with the rotting flesh of former dragons. They marvelled at the brutality with which Drago oversaw the army, stone-cold, like the metal appendage that was fixed at his shoulder. His scars were symbols of his battles against dragons, battles against Vikings, Scots, Englishmen, anyone stupid enough to reject the offer of liberty under the rule of Drago.

Others, who reluctantly joined Drago to save themselves and their families, watched him reign in discomfort and regret. The beasts, which they had been altogether satisfied to watch slave for them, were treated with such horror that gods forbid, some felt _pity_ for the monsters.

The pity extended to those whom were employed by Drago to capture more dragons, in particular a boy in his twenties who, when returning with none (the dragon thieves doing, he claimed), was held down screaming while Drago cut into his chest with a broken dagger, irreparably tearing symbols into his chest.

That young man, Eret, son of Eret, as he was always quick to say, had held Drago in great admiration, but that idea was shredded quickly as his resolve was broken. Now he regarded the man whom he had looked up to with apprehension and fear. This new notion spread amongst Eret's kinsmen like a plague; it took no time for his story to be passed around, whispered,

However, they feared Drago more than they feared the dragon thieves. And to be on what would undoubtedly be the winning side would gain honour for their families, themselves, and their lives would likely be saved. Even if they were lost in battle, it was universally and unconsciously decided that it would be infinitely preferable to be

killed by a dragon thief than by Drago Bludvist.

And in recent days, there had been sightings of a- a _something, _crawling and scampering around. Whether it was a dragon, a person, a ghost, it was unknown. But Drago thought it was something. Guards were posted to scrutinize the desolate landscape for the creature.

The current guard, a member of Eret's Sami crew, looked up at the brief flash of brown against the grey snow. He uncomfortably twisted his sword in his right hand, his left anxiously stroking the tattoo adorning his chin. The snowy landscape looked like it always did: unwelcoming and dead.

There _couldn't _be something out there.

It took much effort to uneasily convince himself of this and that yes, he was relatively safe; no, it wasn't an escaped dragon, and no, the dragon thieves were _not _there, _not _about to strike, _not _about to tear apart the great iron maws and release the demons back into the air.

So he turned away and persuaded himself of this, ignoring the prickling on his neck, and the feeling of a malevolent gaze boring through his skull. As the dock neared, he shivered, and felt relieved as he ordered the next guard to take the post.

As the guard retreated back to the docks, the shape that had caused him so much anxiety dropped back behind a wall of grey, having sneaked a look at the base.

Hiccup sank into the snow and wondered, not the first time whilst camping around Drago's army, if it was possible that he was hopelessly out of his league.

7. Chapter 7

****Hello! Bit of a shorter chapter. Explanations on decisions of a certain character in this chapter will be at the end!****

* * *

><p>Snotlout

They had been in the longboats for only a few hours, and Fishlegs had been puking almost as soon as they had left Berk. Snotlout eyed the larger boy with distaste as Fishlegs moaned, his short neck permanently craned over the side of the ship.

_Pathetic. _They were _Vikings, _it was compulsory for them to have good sea legs. Then again, Fishlegs was obviously called that for a reason.

"I really don't like-" he said to no one in particular, but stopped as he leant over the side and vomited.

Fishlegs might have been emptying his guts for the entire voyage so far, but he must have been having a better time than Snotlout was.

He understood what was happening. He knew what _had _happened.

The chief's, his uncle's, long dead family were alive. Well, whoop-de-doo, he didn't particularly care. He didn't need an aunt and a wunderkind cousin to fawn over. _Berk _didn't need them. He was suited to the role of local prodigy, and had been since his birth.

No one had talked to Snotlout about anything other than 'how wonderful it is that Valka and Hiccup are alive!', but he knew exactly what was lurking under their delighted demeanours. If it was anyone else in the village whose family miraculously came back to life, then there would certainly have been less of a positive reaction to it. And he knew that _he _would have actually been more excited about it. Literally the only reason anybody gave dragon dung about it was because it was the _chief's _family. If it was Tuffnut's mother that went gallivanting off to live amongst dragons, there was absolutely no chance she'd be welcomed back. None at all. And yet the Berkians were so excited about Valka and Hiccup coming back (probably, if the idiot didn't get himself killed). They obviously weren't going to agree on the dragons, but the two of them would be _welcomed _to Berk with open arms.

And underneath all the good cheer and stupid grins as the Vikings sailed off to help some dragoness traitor and her brat, they were entirely aware that if all went well, Snotlout would not be becoming chief.

_Hiccup _would be.

Some savage parody of a person was going to claim his title that was already within his grasp. And what's more, everyone seemed to be fine with it.

Snotlout was dreading meeting the dumb, peaceful traitor, but somehow anticipating it with some excitement.

The sooner he met Hiccup, the sooner he could break his nose; maybe knock out a few teeth. If he was lucky, he might even _kill-__

Wait.

_Killing. _It seemed a little extreme, but it would _work._

Berk didn't know Hiccup. _No one_ knew Hiccup. If he were to die suddenly, they might be initially shaken, but they'd get over it quickly.

Because one can't mourn someone one doesn't know. They literally had not seen him for twenty years. One can't be sad over losing a person one knew for only a day.

The seed of an evil idea took root in Snotlout's brain.

"What a pity Hiccup is dead, I was looking forward tae meeting him."

"Ah, well. I suppose it was tae be expected. Living with dragons, and

all tha'."

It would be so easy to stage an accident. Food poisoning. An incident in the woods. A rogue dragon.

So easy.

Snotlout almost toppled over the side of the longboat with surprise at his thoughts. He wasn't a person that contemplated murder regularly. He was violent, of course, but weren't _all _Vikings? That was in the job description.

And Hiccup was to take his birthright...

Snotlout's idea was fully fledged in his head. He didn't know Hiccup, and he never would. His cousin was completely alien to him.

And anyway, what if he was a threat to Berk? Maybe he didn't want peace with them. Perhaps he was actually going to rile Bludvist up into making an attack, before he brutally killed the latter?

Snotlout would be doing Berk a favour by killing that dragon rider.

And if Drago Bludvist _did _manage to kill him, then that would certainly save _him _the job of doing it-

A largish pile of Viking, complete with stringy dreadlocks and a smell that was unpleasant and very familiar collapsed on top of him.

Snotlout was yanked out of his angry thoughts as Tuffnut Thorston fell against him in a fight against his sister.

"Oh my gods, will you just- Oh, Snotlout! What a surprise! You looking forward to seeing Astrid on a _horse?" _he immediately turned to harass him, leering on the last word as he pushed himself onto his feet, or, pushed Snotlout none-too-gently against the side of the longboat. It was lucky the other boy was so much skinner and not worth the fight, because Snotlout's vision had flared red and he was tempted to throw Tuffnut over the side of the boat.

Ruffnut cackled in the background. "Yeah, Trader Johann would _easily _be able to fit a horse on his ship _and _keep it alive."

And another reason Snotlout was furious:

Astrid's complete and utter mockery of him.

It was another thing of which he knew the other Vikings were talking about when they thought he couldn't hear. How stupid he was. How gullible. How funny it was (even though that Hofferson girl was off with the dragons) that Astrid had made him look like a complete idiot.

The story of Astrid and the saddle had spread so quickly it was dizzying. The comments that followed were even more so.

"â€| Our future chief's not all tha' brightâ€|"

"A _horse? _How was he stupid enough to believe Johann was bringin' a _horse?_"

"I must say, as much as I hate dragons, I have tae support that Hofferson girl. I cannae _believe _she made Jorgenson's son look so dumbâ€¦"

"I do nae want an idiot in charge of the village. Good thing the chief's son is alive. I'll wager he's cleverer!"

The comments were whispered everywhere, but they did not escape Snotlout's ears. They drifted from excited teens going to their first battle, from the mouths of well-meaning adults hell-bent on protecting their village, sailing through the air from people on _different boats._

They were inescapable.

Just as mentions of Astrid were.

Even if comments weren't falling out from few Berkians' mouths with insults about Snotlout's intellect, Astrid and the dragoness woman and her defective son were all anyone was talking about.

Some Vikings fully supported Astrid's actions. Some didn't, but grudgingly announced their admiration for her determination. The others pretended to be neutral, but commented only positively when asked.

Because if _Astrid Hofferson, _of all Vikings, decided that dragons weren't altogether that bad, then they really couldn't be.

Snotlout was sure of several things by now.

1: He was going to become chief, even if it killed him. It was his role. He had prepared for it. This uneducated, wild, dragon brat was not going to take it away from him.

2: He was never going to change his mind about dragons. He didn't care if _Astrid Hofferson _had betrayed him, prancing off to tame dragons.

3: He hated Astrid. Any residual like for her had evaporated, and he was surprised by the icy fist curled in his chest. She must have enjoyed mocking him. And now he hated her more than anyone else in the world, save one.

4: Snotlout hated- no, that word was not strong enough. Loathed. Despised. Detested. Reviled. _Nothing _was strong enough. He _hated_ Stoick's son. He hated Hiccup, his own cousin, with every inch of him. That boy could be the human version of Thor, Odin, every god combined; the bravest, strongest warrior that had ever lived, and he would still hate him. Hiccup was dead to him. He didn't care for Valka, the chief's wife. She posed no threat to his status. But this ghostly boy was to steal chiefdom from betwixt Snotlout's own fingers.

And 5: Snotlout was going to kill Hiccup Horrendous Haddock, no matter the effect on Stoick, no matter how much his cousin screamed,

and no matter how much blood poured from his broken body. No matter the snap of bones, the gurgling, cut-off screams, the flesh cooling as his soul left.

Hiccup was going to die, and it would be by Snotlout's hand, and there was absolutely nothing anyone could do to stop it.

* * *

><p>Drago

Drago Bludvist didn't turn around as Eret approached him.

He knew the boy was there, of course. He could feel the reverberation of Eret's hesitant footsteps, hear the quiet, deep intake of breath as he opened his mouth to speak.

"Drago!" Eret said, with enthusiasm that could only be false. "As you can see, I've returned with my new load of dragonsâ€|"

Indeed, it appeared that was so. Eret's ship had come in several hours ago. Drago had watched from afar, hidden from sight.

However, he'd clearly seen that no dragons were unloaded. The vessel was silent and empty, slices and scratches from previous loads scarring the wood.

Eret had obviously not collected any new dragons.

As Drago had watched the ship come in empty, a dark sort of anger that had once been hard to come by built in his chest. (a long time ago, anyway. It was only after when he, a scarred and orphaned child had vowed to destroy the monsters that in turn had wrecked his life, that the anger came freely and ran darkly.)

He _needed _the dragons.

How else was revenge possible?

"Is that right?" Drago asked. "It looked like you didn't collect any to me." His voice was as dark as his soul, and he imagined Eret's face falling as the boy realised that he was _nothing, _and it made no difference to Drago whether he was alive or not._.

He turned to see Eret stumble a step back, swallowing heavily. His face was paling, the tattoo on his chin appearing even brighter against his whitened skin.

"We did," he insisted. The lie sounded weak, and it was obvious Eret knew this. His voice was steely for the next statement, but the untruth was transparent. "They've been unloaded already."

The boy was stupid. If he had wanted to live, then he should have learned to lie better. Burning and cutting a reminder into Eret's skin should have been warning enough of what would happen if he was failed again.

The punishment this time would be much harsher.

Eret's eyes lowered to the ground nervously, and Drago's flicked to

the side. He raised his hand and struck the stony, cold ground with his staff, a _snap_ like ice cracking making the young man in front of him shudder.

The sound echoed through the base, a dull thunderclap that sent even the ones furthest from him quaking and furtively looking around.

"Get rid of him."

The words were spoken quietly. Drago marvelled at the effect they had on Eret (widened eyes, and his mouth opening in horror) before eight crossbows were levelled at him.

"Drago!" His previous enthusiasm was gone completely. His voice was full of desperation and panic. Drops of sweat were beading up on Eret's forehead, despite the bitter cold.

Good.

"No, wait! Next time I'll have them, I _promise-_"

Drago turned away from the Sami man stumbling over his words, arms and hands wildly gesturing.

And then he saw it.

A flicker of brown and green against the grey snow, disappearing in a motion not unlike something- or someone- ducking from view.

One of the dragon riders, no doubt.

Drago's scarred lips curled into a smile. Only one of the riders would be stupid and naïve enough to come and spy.

Eret's pleas grew louder, and Drago spun and knocked a crossbow out of the startled hands of the soldier closest to him.

"Stop."

Eret's arms were shielding his head. He blinked and looked at Drago with utmost fear.

Perhaps Eret would be exceedingly useless at times, but it was always enjoyable instilling fear into his heart.

"Capture the dragon rider spying on us, and I'll forget your failure. If you can't, don't come back at all, or you _will _regret it. Go now."

Eret's arms and the crossbows were lowered. Pitiful words of thanks and promises to fulfil Drago's wishes spilled from the Sami's mouth, but the Dragon Master was no longer listening.

* * *

><p>Alright! I must now have an explanation for what I believe is Snotlout's OOCness.
**

**I decided to put more of Snotlout's character in the books into

him. I mean, Book!Snotlout is _mean. _Thinking back, he tries to kill Hiccup multiple times (as do his friends, occasionally), and he openly despises and mocks him worse than in the movies. He's angry at Hiccup's birthright, since Hiccup is a complete disaster according to Berkians, and so takes it out on him in a number of cruel ways.**

Also, Snotlout is exceedingly arrogant. It's more of a loveable and funny trait in the movies and the TV show, but Snotlout has been living in the knowledge that Hiccup will become chief. In my fic, Snotlout has been preened and prepared by his father and the village to become chief. And having that snatched away at the last possible minute would make him _furious. _(It does.)

On top of that, Astrid (inadvertently) made him look like a complete idiot. He's being mocked by the rest of Berk for his gullibility. And he's not used to that, is he? However, Canon Hiccup is. He's spent his whole life being the joke. It wouldn't affect him being made the joke another time. But Snotlout... wow. He would take it really, really hard.

**So, let's count. Book!Snotlout, arrogant and prepared for a life of chiefting. Has that taken away, is openly mocked, and everything he's been raised for is being taken away in one fell swoop by a total stranger who is living with _dragons, _right. Like, _the enemy._

>

IDK but I'd probably take it badly if I were Snotlout.

**Okay, explanation over. Stay tuned.**

8. Chapter 8

Oh, you guys, thanks for your patience! I finished my exams and everything, so I hoped to get back to writing, but the gods of writing refused me. Not only did I have excessive technical issues (including my internet dying and my laptop charger disappearing mysteriously for a few days) and a last minute _hey, we're going on a Wi-fi free holiday, _I had (and still have) the worst case of writers block ever. So, I'm sorry the chapter's so short, and it'll probably be a long time before other updates...

* * *

><p>"Spread out!" Eret, son of Eret ordered his men, sweeping the air in front of him with the blade of his sword. A faint whoosh could be heard from its movement, and for a second, Eret imagined it to be the call of a Night Fury.

_Rubbish, _he scowled to himself. _They're extinct, and I shouldn't think it likely that they'd be around these areas anymore even so._

His men fanned out and trudged forward unenthusiastically through the snow. Three men went to Eret's left, curling around the corner and out of sight, four to the right, down into a cave that twisted downwards, and Eret himself stalked directly towards an opening in the cavernous ice structure, that had somehow grown a roof over the

top, spikes of blue-green ice.

The opening was freedom, he supposed, but he would never dare sprint through there and never come back. He had considered it so many times, but whenever he had turned, just checking, just making sure that there was no one watching-

Drago. Of course.

When he'd first begun collecting dragons for Drago, five years ago, he had look at Drago like he was an idol, the perfect definition of what a hero was. Using the oppressors to secure freedom for others.

Well, the idea of freedom that Eret had once thought of was very different to the one he believed in now.

There was a beam of light striking through the opening, the only tiny piece of hope in the nightmare that some of his men called 'home'.

The disgusted look he'd dealt the man who said that was an expression that was often etched onto his features.

Eret turned his head a little, just to check that he wasn't being watched. He had an intense dislike for his movements to be- well, _catalogued _by Drago's men (almost as if he couldn't be trusted! How about that?), and he had that odd prickling feeling on the back of his neck that was a sure sign of being scrutinised. Even as he turned, he felt the scars the red-hot dagger had burned into his chest pulse in the most unpleasant way.

Eret could see Drago's black eyes gleaming even from the distance.

To be honest, he wasn't even the slightest bit surprised.

From a far closer, far more uncomfortable range, was the slowly decomposing cadaver of a dragon. He couldn't even see what kind it was, but it hardly mattered. The snow and ice had done nothing in hiding the stench of old meat.

Eret felt one of those prolonged shivers that made him feel like there was a demon of some sort attempting (almost successfully, he might add) to possess him.

Drago's eyes glowed from under his low forehead; his message very clear.

Eret shuddered, and turned away.

The opening was looking even more promising. Although he had no intention of even contemplating escape after that glare, it was always good to have a break from Drago and his crazinessâ€|

Craziness?

When had he started thinking of Drago like that?

Eret climbed up to the hole, frowning the whole way there.

As his fingers gripped the edge and he hoisted himself through, he hoped for a second that it might be nicer out there than it was in the cavern.

It was very bleak.

Well, Eret knew it was far more so _inside _the cave, but it _was _still bleak outside too, soâ€|

It was still fairly disappointing.

There wasn't much of a difference in surroundings. Cold, snowy, but at least the snow wasn't grey. That always put him off returning. And it didn't smell all that strongly of rotting meat out in the wind, so that was a considerable bonus that Eret very, very much appreciated.

He thought briefly of the festering carcass he'd passed in his haste to leave the docks. He shuddered, not for the first time that day.

Eret discontentedly surveyed the area. The blue sky was nice, a friendly face in the demonic and ungodly happenings around him, but unfortunately, for him, there was absolutely no chance that there was a dragon rider around the place.

Humans just weren't that good at camouflage. Dragons, wolves, other animals- well, yeah, they had to be. They were _animals. _Survival instincts, right?

He stared at the snow, a white blanket piled up over the rocks (or ice), and willed a dragon or _something _to appear.

It'd be nice if his own survival instincts would make some monster appear to him for capture. Maybe then Drago would forget about the earlier incident and allow him to stay in his employ.

Eret grumpily thought that if he had stuck with his job as a blacksmith back in Norway, he wouldn't have had to worry about being executed by his employer. Maybe they were strict, back there, but at least there wasn't the threat of death hanging over his head every morning. And no dragons either.

Not the first time, Eret contemplated travelling back and resuming his life before he'd gotten into that dragon-trapping business.

He became faintly aware of a voice, and spun around as his second in command grasped his arm and yanked it back in the direction of Drago's armada.

"Sir," he gasped, "we found them, they're hidden in one of the caves."

Eret's vision tunnelled onto the hole leading back to the camp.

"Have they seen you?" he hissed, grasping his worker by the arms, feeling the man recoil from his tight grip.

"No, it looks like the dragon's asleep," he panted back, face ruddy and pink from exertion.

"Take me there!" Eret ordered without delay, and his fellow countryman gladly led him down to the caves.

* * *

><p>"This isâ€| incredible," Astrid gasped, her voice full of wonder. Valka smiled knowingly as the girl gaped and gawked at the Bewilderbeast, which stared fairly stonily back at the girl.

He liked her.

Valka could always tell when he liked something or disliked something. There was a glint in the huge dragon's eye that wasn't present when the babies pounced on him, and just by glancing at the beast, she could tell if he was happy, whether he was hungry, or whether it was an excellent time to steer clear of the alpha dragon.

It had taken her a very long time.

When she'd first arrived there with Hiccup, a quaking, shivering young woman with a baby wrapped in her arms (a baby that was all too eager to crawl off and play earnestly with one of the baby dragons), her immediate response to the alpha breathing a frost over her was to silently panic, eyes wide, wondering whether or not it was a bad idea to faint. Swooning would mean she could be eaten without having to deal with watching the dragon do so. Not swooning meant she'd lose every measly hope of escaping.

The dragon had looked at her, and then she'd recognised the amusement on its face. It had never meant to hurt her.

As Valka looked at Astrid now, the young woman's mouth hung open in a smile as she ran her fingers down her braid, scraping off the ice crystals nestled in the strands.

A very different reaction to what she had expected, if Valka was honest with herself. A little more screaming and axe-wielding would have been the Viking norm. But then again, Astrid wasn't a typical Viking. Sure, she seemed to be impetuous and violent enough to make the gods smile down on her, thinking _we have really done well with this one, haven't we?, _but her connection with dragons was something that completely changed her.

Valka wasn't entirely surprised to have heard that Astrid had once been exactly like all other Berkians, dragon-slaying the top of her priority list as a fifteen-year-old.

"Isn't it?" Valka agreed, propping her staff up against a rock. "He likes yeh."

Astrid rubbed some ice of her shoulder plate, and her expression became business-like.

"Okay. So now that we're at the nest, what are we going to do about Hiccup?"

* * *

><p>I'm sorry, it's going to be a while before I update again. I'm just having so much trouble writing this; Writers' block something terrible. But man, thanks for being so patient. It'll also be a while because I'm becoming horribly aware that the quality of my writing is getting trashier and trashier with every chapter, and I really do want to do a good job for you guys. Gotta up my game...</p>

9. Chapter 9

Oh thank the All-Father an actual _chapter. _I'm just as surprised to be honest.

Unfortunately the hiatus will start once this chapter has been read. :(Yeah, I'm pretty disappointed too. Writing has gotten darn _hard. _I miss the days when I could churn a couple of chapters in one day.

Anyway, I love you guys! You've all been so patient, I'm very sorry to have to inflict another long wait on you! Stay awesome.

* * *

><p>"Right there," Eret's second in command hissed quietly, rolling his eyes in the direction of the fugitives urgently.</p>

They were hiding behind a great mound of snow in one of the caves. It wasn't the most comfortable of hiding places, nor was it the best, but it was doing its job for the moment and Eret was grateful for that at least, despite the chill leaking into his bones via his uncovered skin.

Pfft. He was Sami. He was used to this sort of thing; this sort of weather; danger in general. It was hardly something surprising. He internally ordered the cold to disappear and _stop bothering him, _and was pleased to feel it evaporate meekly away.

One of his men, just one member of the eight, shifted uncomfortably, eyeing the entrance to the cave with a look that screamed 'I-am-reconsidering-this-job'.

"You," Eret snarled as softly as possible, which was quite a decent bit of work considering how hard it was to keep that 'will-rip-you-apart' tone when he was speaking under his breath. "You think Drago will happily let you go? No. You're in this with me."

"He's only angry at you," the man replied weakly. He could see tiny wheels moving in his head, judging which out of execution by a Night Fury or Drago Bludvist would be the more painful.

"He won't care if you're not me," Eret said, effectively finishing the conversation as the insubordinate gulped, allowed his eyes to flick back to the entrance, before he nodded reluctantly.

Eret peeked over the mound, preparing to see the Night Fury, but being shocked by it anyway.

As a child, a teenager, and an adult, the words 'Night Fury' had always filled him with apprehension and fear. Not exactly fear of the dragon itself; there only seemed to be one or two haunting the skies and they had never attacked ships. He knew everything there was to know about dragons, the beasts, and he wouldn't allow fear of one he didn't recognise to control him.

But he was scared nonetheless, mostly because of what he did not know about the dragon. Could it spit venom, as well as the purple plasma he'd so often heard about, so often he could practically claim the memories for his own? How was it in close combat? How large were its claws? Its teeth? How large was the beast overall?

And more importantly, could Eret and his trappers take it down?

All questions that had tormented him, but looking at the creature now, all his fear and doubt ebbed away.

It looked _timid._

No. Perhaps that wasn't the best word for it.

Eret searched his mind, so full of weapons and movements and attack positions; it was hard to find what he was looking for.

Tame.

The beast appeared to be _tame._

It wasn't a large dragon, nor was it bulky, nor did it possess spines or spikes that would hamper any attempt of capturing it.

Its scales were dark as the night-sky, which, Eret thought irritably, was probably the reason it had never been seen.

Before now.

Eret allowed his eyes to rove over the creature, which appeared to be dormant. The wings folded up neatly on its back looked scarred, as if by a bola, but they looked as strong as they could have ever been. The legs were graceless, more like stumps than actual appendages, with short, stubby claws that looked like they could cause no damage at all.

The head was one of the bigger surprises. Instead of the savage teeth he had imagined to protrude viciously from the beast's mouth, there was nothing. The dragon's mouth was open slightly, and even with the poor light and the distance from the creature, Eret could see the pink, slimy surface of gums.

_Well, _Eret thought. It did make sense, actually. The force of the purple fire was apparently strong enough to knock down buildings, not just set them on fire. Any teeth would merely get in the way of the blast and be possibly destroyed.

All in all, the Night Fury was catlike. That was the only adjective

Eret could bring up that summed up the dragon. He supposed it was logical, cats were stealthy and silent, killers and hunters, just as this dragon was.

There was but one thing that confused him.

The harness.

Of all things to be found on a wild dragon, a _harness _was dangerously close to the bottom of the list. How would it be attached without the Night Fury savagely blasting the unhappy victim all the way to Jotunheim and back?

And the tailâ€¦

Where there should have been a very black, organic tailfin, there was a human-made fin of mismatched dragon scales. Eret could recognise the different species; there was a sky blue nadder one, a couple of gronkle belly scales, a fold of leathery dragon hide, presumably shed from one of the rarer speciesâ€¦

Someone was particularly desperate to keep that dragon in business.

"Hey, bud!" A voice called out, and Eret ducked back down behind the snow. A few of his men, the ones who had been shifting nervously, appeared to have lost all fear at the sound of such a young voice.

Eret's eyes narrowed and he lifted his head just fractionally, just so he could see who it was.

Yep, suspicions confirmed.

The owner of the voice was a very skinny, lanky boy, probably five or so years younger than Eret himself. In the brief glimpse the dragon-trapper had gotten of him, he'd seen the complex armour covering the dragon-rider's arms and torso. It appeared they were made from dragon scales and leather, the sort of thing the harness, saddle and artificial tailfin were constructed of. He looked like a throwaway Viking, a mistake that had been made, and so was cast from his village.

And he obviously _had _made quite a large mistake, judging by the prosthetic leg.

A dragon's doing, or a trap's? Eret mused. He had vague recollections of someone angrily claiming their trap had caught a person, one who seemed to have cut off his foot rather than remain there. Perhaps this was that person?

If that wasn't the case, Eret was quite confused as to why the kid (oh yes, he was most certainly a child. Look at those non-existent muscles and the armour trying to hide the fact that he was a walking, talking, dragon-riding fishbone) still hung around with dragons. Eret knew that if he hung around with some person who bit off his hand or stabbed him or something, he'd sure feel disinclined to stay anywhere near them.

A feeling at the back of his mind told him he was a liar, but he

didn't see how that was possible.

The dragon perked its head up and its eyelids opened, revealing startlingly green eyes that Eret hoped would never be fixated on him.

The dragon warbled something to the boy, who stopped and folded his lanky arms. "What? No greeting, just 'did you bring any food?' That's what I get for hanging round with a dragon," the boy said conversationally, and the Night Fury let out a garbled bark of laughter, followed by a long yawn and a stretch.

Nope, Eret thought. Not a laugh. Probably an 'I'll eat you, kid'.

"And no, I haven't," the boy continued nasally. "Drago and his men are still swarming like Terrible Terrors, I'm not going to go and steal something while their guard's up."

Another growl, and the kid snorted.

"_Fishing? _What haven't you understood about 'Drago', 'men', 'swarming' and 'guard'?"

Thor almighty_, _Eret thought blandly. He's completely insane.

Thinking a _dragon _had a _language, _of all things! And pretending to _understand _it. Eret shook his head in stupefied disbelief.

The dragon ignored the boy and twisted itself into a more comfortable position, sniffing absently around in a circle. Then it froze, and its nostrils dilated, pink rims showing beside the black scales.

"What?" the boy asked tensely, immediately jumping into a defensive stance. He bent low, almost like those funny monkey things Eret saw if they ever went a little too far south, and Eret got the distinct feeling that this boy could be quite dangerous.

Of course, it was just a feeling. And considering how ridiculous the kid looked, it was quite a job to try not to laugh. Eret turned his head to look at his men, only to find them all pink in the face and one of them with a fist stuck in his mouth.

They stopped grinning when they heard the dragon growl.

The hairs on the back of Eret's neck prickled, and he warily glanced back over to the boy.

The young dragon-rider was slowly walking over to them, feet- or foot, rather- treading quietly and carefully in the snow. Eret shivered; there wasn't the slightest trace of noise.

"Toothless," the boy whispered, "if you're messing with meâ€|"

He was very close now, Eret could see the his eyes through the helmet, green and shadowed and darting around crazily in search for some danger.

They just never glanced at him.

Eret stuck his hand behind his back and made a signal; five fingers, counting down.

"There are people outside the cave, not sure about inside-"

Fourâ€|

"What can you smell?"

Threeâ€|

The boy's hand reached for a silvery, welded cylinder clipped to his leg.

Twoâ€|

Left hand wrapped around the cylinder, holding it out like a sword but there was no _blade, _stupid kid-

Oneâ€|

The boy met Eret's eyes.

"_Now!"_

* * *

><p>Once more, thanks for your patience! Hope you find ten thousand better written fics in the time it takes me to write the next chapter! Hope you guys are all happy wherever you are!
**

10. Chapter 10

***SCREAMS* HEY HEY HEY WOULD YOU LOOK AT _THAT, _IT'S AN UPDATE! IT'S NOT LIKE IT'S BEEN 360 DAYS OR ANYTHING**

* * *

><p>Eret snarled and dove for the kid, who made a similar noise right back at him and slid his feet backwards in the snow, bending his knees and look surprisingly dangerous for such a lanky figure. Eret landed with a soft whump in the snow, he considered being winded before he got over it and wrapped his calloused fingers around the chilled metal of the boy's leg.

The skinny kid made a shocked _augh _as he hit the ground with a clatter, Eret's weight suddenly pulling on his metal leg, which skidded, managing to crunch against the rock beneath the snow. Sparks flew, and Eret flinched as they flickered a little too close to his eyes. Dangerous, this was. And he hadn't even gone for the dragon yet!

Something punched him in the eye, managing to push into his nose at the same time, and he spat out a curse, eyes watering and the scene before him blurring under a sliding veil of tears.

His grip slipped on the leg, and the kid began squirming away.

Eret snarled and pushed down on the kid, intent on holding him still so the dragon could be more easily taken by his men (who had all stupidly gone for the Night Fury), but it was like trying to hold onto a wet fish. The boy slipped through his arms with an agility Eret didn't consider _possible- _especially from such a _scrawny _little man- rolling backwards and coming up standing, the ominous silver cylinder clasped firmly in his hand.

Eret swore with feeling, and made a second lunge as he heard the screech of his men behind him, facing down the dragon. The boy's thumb hovered over a tiny switch, and found himself toppling to the ground, Eret's arms tying his arms to his waist, and that silver cylinder dropping and clattering, bouncing across the stones. Gas â€" was that _Zippleback _gas? â€" began leaking into the cave from the device.

One of his men cried out, and scurried past him as he pressed the dragon rider's face into the ground. "What are you doing?" he demanded, too focused on the scrambling kid to look at his men. There was an odd sound like a shriek of thunder, moved up to a higher pitch, and then â€"

"_Blast, get down!"_

Eret flattened himself to the ground, loudly-protesting dragon-rider squashed beneath him. The hair on the back of his neck sizzled, and Eret felt sick for a second wondering what would have happened if his head had been in the way. The heat alone burned his skin, and he flinched, patting at the back of his head with a large hand. Hair crumbled away between his fingers into ash.

The dragon-rider let out a furious yell, pointy elbows jabbing this way and that. One caught Eret in the side of his head with surprising strength, and he sat backwards with the shock of it all, feeling a bruise on his cheekbone join his blackening eye, swelling nose, and the blistering burns on the back of his scalp.

The prosthetic leg skidded and more sparks flew, but Eret wasn't scared of them anymore. A dragon had just breathed â€" fire, or plasma or whatever the Hel that was at him, and he'd survived. A few little sparks were _nothing._

The dragon-rider was breathing heavily through his nose, and then one armoured hand was reaching down, reaching down towards his leg where there was a silvery handle sticking out..

And Eret wasn't going to let this boy get an advantage. He lunged once again, one arm encircling the kid's waist, the hand of the other punching up just under his jaw with a force that made the boy's breath stop. They crashed back down to the floor, the rider kicking at his knees, and Eret flinched as hard metal collided with his kneecap.

There was a thick _slap _from behind him, and three of his men sailed backwards, striking the cave wall and bringing chunks of the icy cavern down upon them. Two shook their heads and feebly struggled to get up. And the dragon pulled back its tail, preparing for another

blow that would take Eret and all his remaining men out, but

-

"_Dragon!" _he bellowed stupidly, dragging himself and the rider back to their feet, one arm locked around the other's throat. It was a _dragon. _It wasn't going to respond! It wasn't even going to _understand. _It was a dumb, vicious beast intent only on pain and hurt and eating. One of his men, the one still prone on the ground, tilted his head up just so he could peek at the action.

"People generally like being _addressed _by their _names,_" the dragon-rider said indignantly, another elbow coming out of nowhere and planting itself into Eret's stomach. _Oof. _That kid was _stronger _than he looked, too! Not just speedy!

"Oh, I'm sorry," Eret snarled, pulling the boy's head back so his throat was exposed. And then he reached down with a free hand, ignoring the elbows and the kicking, and pulled out a knife. "_Mr. _Dragon, you can stop that _right now _or your young friend here is going to find himself lacking in several organs and a fair amount of blood. Understand?"

The rider made a sound in the back of his throat, but Eret had no time to analyse it. He stared at the dragon.

And the dragon stared back.

And, startlingly, it stopped. Eret nearly released the rider from the shock. It then cast Eret the most withering glare that had ever been bestowed upon him. Nearly as awful as the murderous look in Drago's eyes barely half an hour ago.

Nearly as awful.

"You do understand," Eret said somewhat weakly.

The dragon looked faintly amused, but its face quickly turned back into a snarl, and the dragon-rider groaned.

"Really?" The boy said irritably. "Really? You're only getting that now? Aren't you meant to know this about dragons? You capture them for a living!"

"Shut it, tiny," Eret snapped. His men started climbing back to their feet, groaning, but the dragon didn't attack them. It just sat there, eyes narrowed, teeth â€" wait, didn't it _not _have teeth about thirty seconds ago? Anyway, teeth visible in a growl like a big cat.

The rider didn't take his advice. "Can't you see? Don't you understand what it means?"

"_What _means?"

The rider's voice suddenly lowered, calm and quiet and reassuring in a way Eret had not heard in years. "He understands you. He's _intelligent_."

"Yeah, I got that from the â€" _No, _that's a _dragon. _They're beasts. Dumb animals."

The dumb animal glared at him so irritably that Eret felt his iron resolve waver.

"They're _intelligent,"_ the rider repeated. Didn't Eret tell him to shut up just a few moments ago? But it was true! The beast was intelligent, it _knew _what he was saying, it _knew " " "You don't have to fight them!"

"They're _dragons. _That's what they're _for_."

The rider shook his head, infuriatingly calm. "I don't think you believe that."

"I " Eret felt the rider slip out from his grasp, and was almost about to snatch him back, but the boy didn't move away far, just so he could speak without a knife to his throat. Eret held the blade out to the rider's chest, and he took a hasty step back, hands out as though he were trying to pacify him.

"I can _help you,"_ the rider said. He turned, gesturing to all of Eret's Sami crew, who were watching the whole display with open mouths and confusion in their eyes. "I can help all of you. _We _can help all of you."

The dragon warbled affirmative.

"Do you honestly want to follow Drago? He was going to _kill you. _He would kill all of you in a second if it would help him in his quest." The calm quality to the boy's voice was rapidly disappearing; he was making wild gestures to no one, but what he said made _sense. _"Drago doesn't _care _about dragons or people, not anymore. Maybe he started out differently, but at the moment he is using his power to achieve " something. I don't know what," he admitted. "And do you?"

Eret chewed on his lip.

"No," one of his men offered, raising his hand like a child. Eret glared at him.

"I'm here to help all of you," the rider stated confidently, "and that's including Drago. He's lost his way, treating people like dragons and dragons like people, and _neither _how they should be." His speech was punctuated with pauses and gaps like he was trying to find the right words to fit the concepts that were travelling at dragon-fire speed through his mind. "There is a peaceful solution to this conflict between Drago and dragons and the rest of the _world, _and I'm here to find it. And I won't _allow _any of you to get hurt. From what I've seen, I don't think you have a choice in the matter."

"We don't," Eret replied automatically, and nearly punched himself in the face for it. _Idiot. _"But don't think for a second we're going to join ranks with these " " he wildly waved his hand at the dragon.

The dragon glared.

He could almost see the rider smiling under that helmet.

"Not _now, _obviously," the rider laughed. "Just â€" just give me a chance to prove to you that they aren't what you _think _they are, okay?"

Eret tightened the grip on his knife.

"Let me show you," the rider said, almost pleadingly, and the dragon leaned forward, gently butting its head into the boy's hand. And there, on its back, clearly exposed, was that saddle.

Eret felt his knife lower of its own accord, and the rider stretched out a hand to take Eret's and lead him to the dragon, and â€"

A bola flew across the cavern, the rider tensed as he saw it coming and then it crashed into his shoulder, a _crack _sounding from where the joint must have been knocked out of place, the other end smacking into the side of the helmet and then the rider was on the ground, out like a candle had been blown on.

The dragon screamed and lurched to protect the rider, but there were darts and nets being thrown and it was only seconds before the dragon too was sprawled on the icy floor, pitifully moaning and nudging with failing strength at its fallen master.

Eret was still frozen. His crew were frozen. And yet there was man hoisting the rider up over his shoulder, a great many gripping the cords tying the dragon down and pulling towards the cave entrance, and then right there was Drago, laughing darkly, just laughing.

* * *

><p>And now...

back to the hiatus

(hopefully not another _year _though)

End
file.